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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 28, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER, 1947

COMPLETE NOVEL

The Kiowa Killer

By Jackson Cole

Like a rattlesnake, this evil dealer in death gives warning of his approach, and his grim deeds terrorize Brasada County until the fighting Lone Wolf Lawman takes over! Follow Jim Hatfield as he goes into a fast-action gun campaign when sinister mystery stalks! **11**

SHORT STORIES

WOLF LITTER ***by A. B. MacKenzie*** **68**
The kid was just a freckled youngster, but he was ready to fight like a man

GUNS AGAINST EL GATO ***by Melvin Gable*** **74**
The real identity of this hunted outlaw was a deep mystery of the rangeland

THE BLIZZARD TRAITOR ***by Gunnison Steele*** **83**
In a blinding snowstorm, Sheriff Bill Norbec must pursue his best friend

PLUMB BOGGED DOWN ***by Cliff Walters*** **91**
Easy-going, kind-hearted Budge Bronson shows a heap of unsuspected savvy

DOC SWAP'S CABIN COUP ***by Ben Frank*** **97**
The Tradin' Hombre runs into one of the gol-dingedest deals of his career

AND

THE FRONTIER POST ***by Captain Starr*** **6**
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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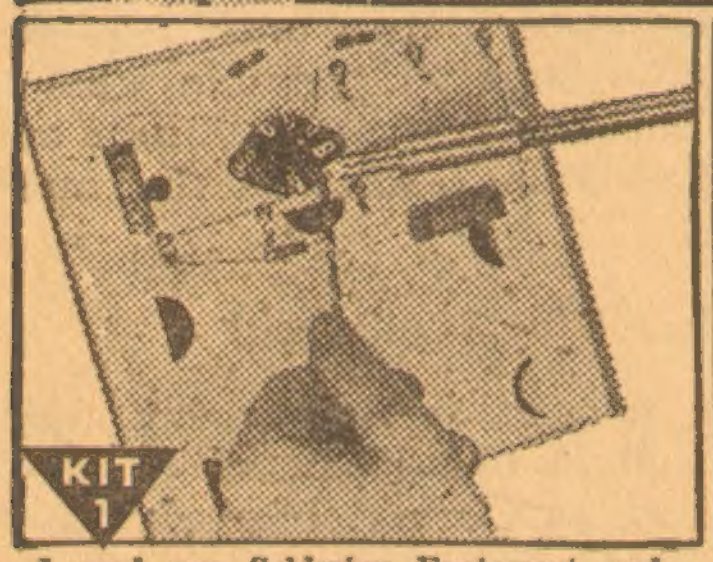

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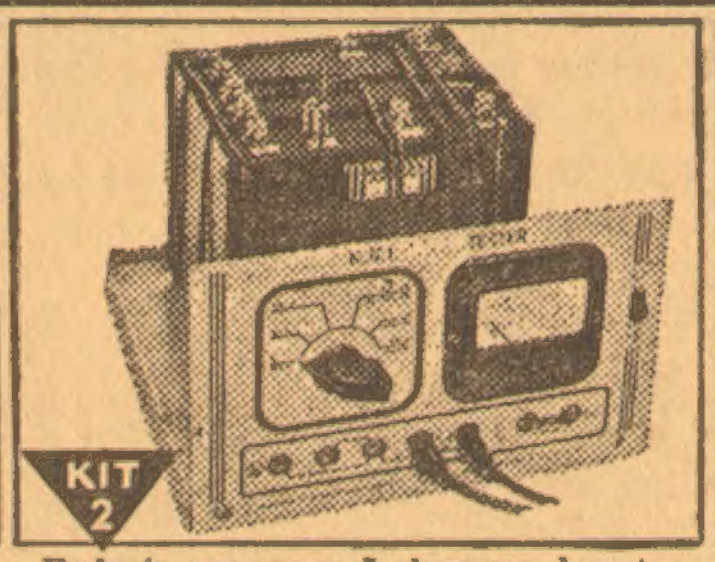

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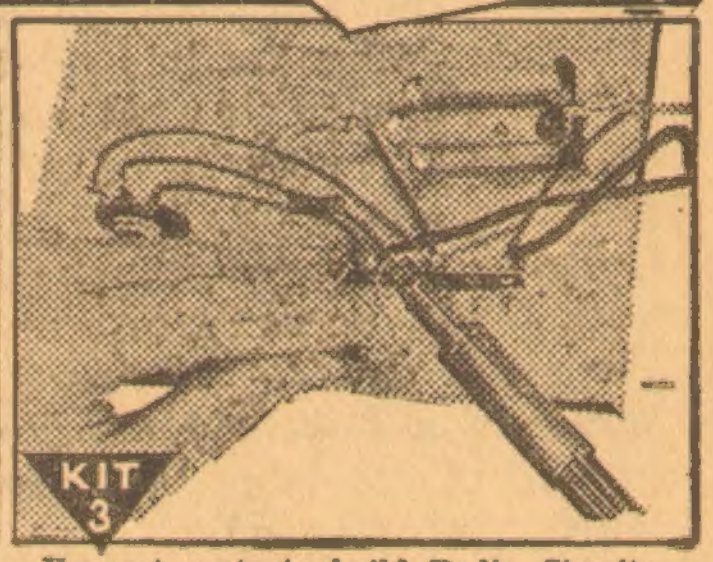

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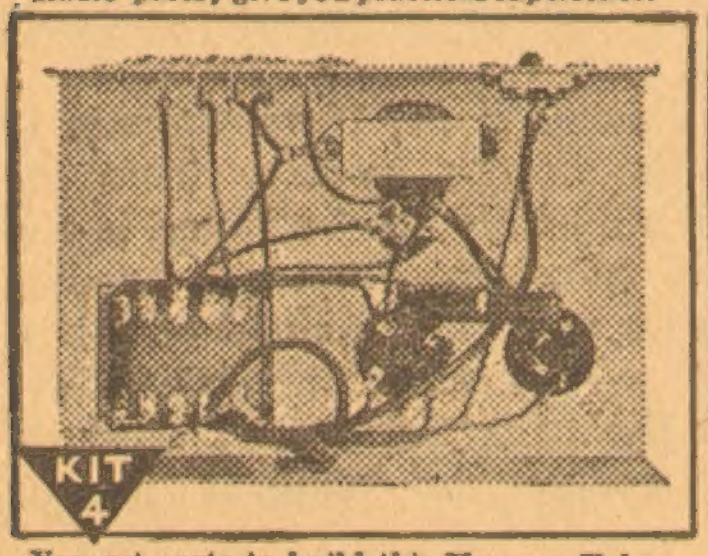

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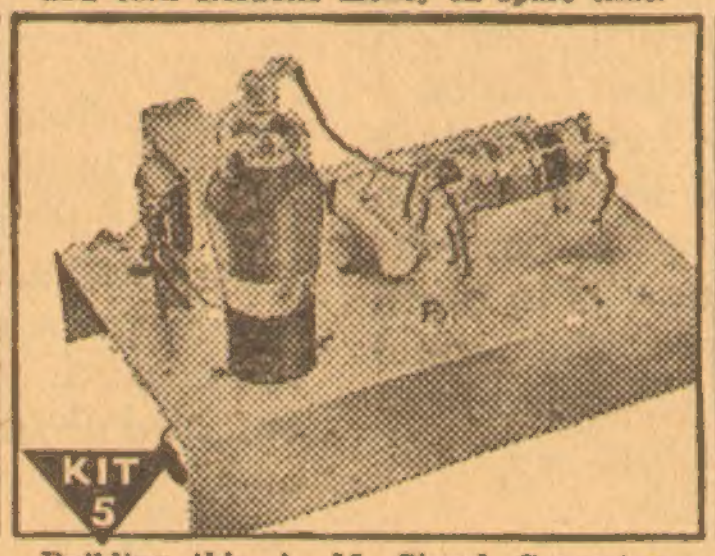

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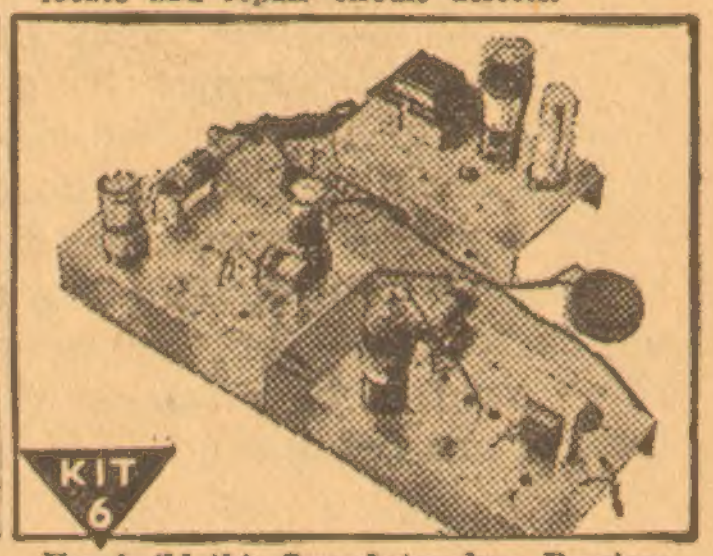

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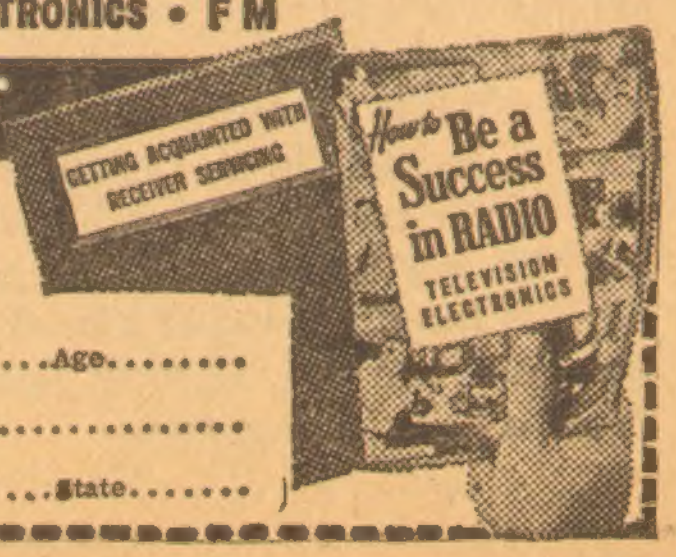

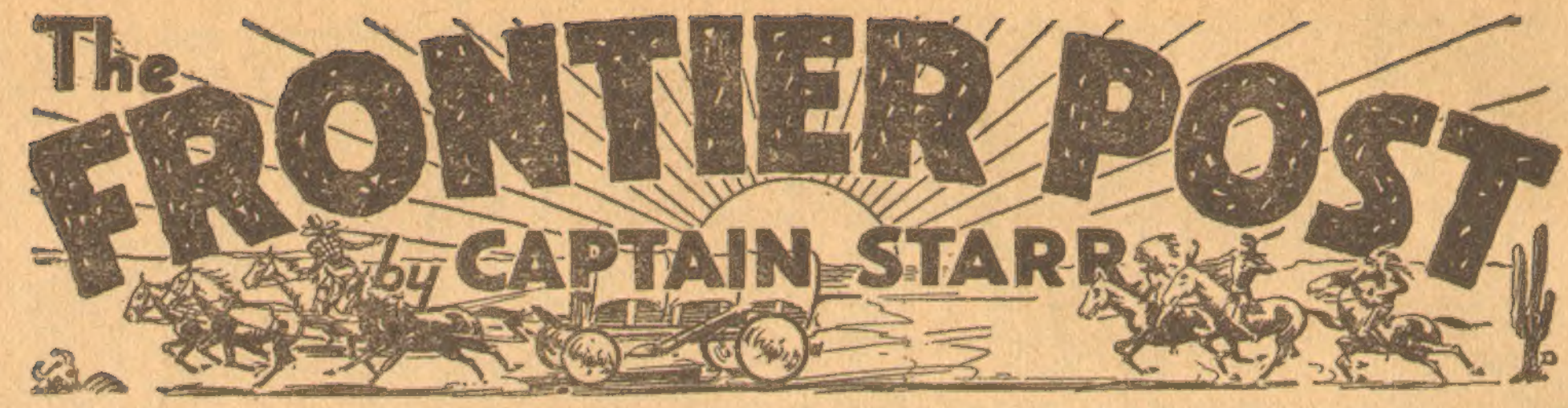

HIYA, gals and galluses. The subject that's topmost in my mind as we gather for this get-together is education. I'll tell you what started it. Lately I was told that more folks, old and young, are going to school nowadays than ever before. Colleges and training schools are crowded with grown-up veterans, which helps to swell the total. In a good many families, little junior is giving the eye to Pop's report card, instead of the other way around, like it always used to be.

You hear a lot of criticism nowadays about our system of public education. It is taking a lot of lambasting. Our crowded schools and low-paid teachers have their faults, I reckon. But it seems to me that schooling is way ahead of what it used to be. When I was a young sprout, they tried to hammer knowledge into us. The idea now is to teach pupils to think for themselves. The school room used to be a mighty dull place. Now lessons are being made interesting.

Cowboy Question

I was surprised in looking over a 3rd grade question-and-answer lesson sheet brought home by Jimmy, aged 8. Here was one of 'em:

In what order do cowboys do these things at a round-up?

rope the calves
collect the calves
ride to the round-up
mark them with a brand
turn them loose

You'd think that it came from some little Western cowtown school, wouldn't you? Well, it didn't. Little Jimmy lives in the staid and steady State of Ohio. There was a lot more on the lesson sheet, of course. And all of it was more interesting and instructive than the problems I had to do, which generally concerned the divvying of a bushel of apples that two dull parties named A and B had got from a gent known as C.

What made such problems all the duller for us Western kids was that in those days we didn't have any glimmering notion what a bushel was. Bushel measure wasn't used out West. It isn't used much now, for that matter.

What We Memorized

Then, when it came to memorizing, they crammed us full of old poems about back East things, such as Cock Robin, snow and Hiawatha. The jaspers that made up our textbooks didn't seem to know that such subjects were plum foreign to Western schoolkids.

The whole Pacific slope, from Canada to Mexico, and the border country from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico in Texas, is and was practically snowless. Buzzards heading north was a sign of spring instead of robins flying south. Our Western robin was a different bird than the back East robin, anyhow, and didn't resemble the pictures in our schoolbooks.

As for Hiawatha, he was a hard character to swallow for such of us that knew Western blanket Indians, which were totally different people.

The upshot of it all is that kids nowadays are having a better time of it, East and West. To my notion they're learning more, learning it faster, and a heap more painlessly. The methods are better.

So if you are one of the gals or galluses, old or young, that is going to school, be thankful for the improvements in education. If you hear somebody running our school system down, ask him to prove that he knows what he's talking about.

Cattle Brands

Another thing I've noticed lately is the widespread use of cattle brands for ornamental purposes. Brands have become such a popular decoration that they're seen on draperies, table linen, leather goods, outdoor-

(Continued on page 8)

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*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.

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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

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I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.

*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

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I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.

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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

wear and even on dishes. Maybe even in other ways that I don't know about.

Consequently, reading brands has become a sort of pastime. There's nothing difficult about naming a brand, once you get the hang of it. In order to help you to learn how, I've sketched out a few well-known irons. Here they are.

Look 'em over and see how many you can figure out your ownself before you turn to the answers at the end of this confab.

If you live in a part of the country where there are horses, hosses or hawses, then you've seen horse trailers, towed along behind automobiles. They're so numerous in some localities that building 'em has grown into a special industry.

Some trailers are mighty fine, all shiny and painted, with padded sides and curved plexiglas windshields. In them, critters calmly cavort across the scenery up to 50 miles per hour.

What Do the Horses Think?

Often I wonder what horses think about that kind of travel. Some look as though they plumb enjoyed it. I also wonder in just what mysterious way horses in general got used to automobiles.

Back in the beginning of automobile days, practically all horses went spooky and wild at the sight and sound of a chug-wagon. Many a faithful, steady old family Dobbin hit

(Continued on page 107)

Why be a Papuan?

OUR FRIEND, the anthropologist, told us that only a Papuan could have designed these ceremonial masks. We'd have believed him — except for one thing. We know the man who doodled them . . . just traced the outline of a paper clip and shaded to suit.

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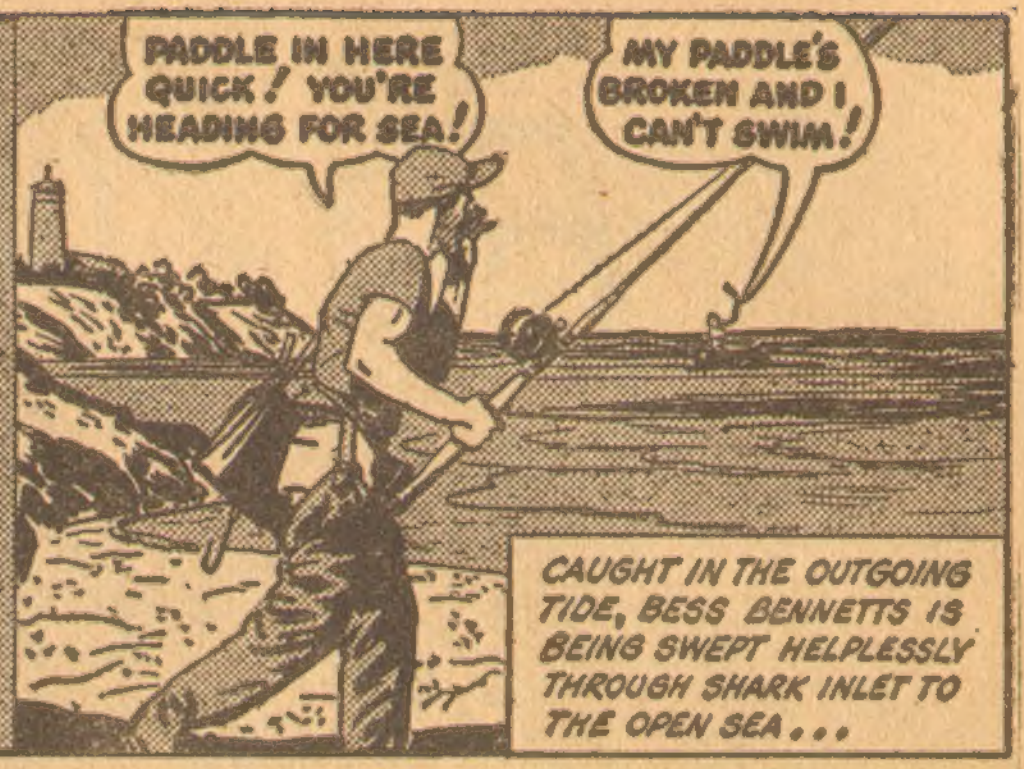
PADDLE IN HERE QUICK! YOU'RE HEADING FOR SEA!
MY PADDLE'S BROKEN AND I CAN'T SWIM!
CAUGHT IN THE OUTGOING TIDE, BESS BENNETTS IS BEING SWEPT HELPLESSLY THROUGH SHARK INLET TO THE OPEN SEA . . .

WHEW! NO STRIPED BASS EVER GAVE ME A FIGHT LIKE THAT
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Jim Hatfield did a frog-hop to one side, gun in hand, as Susan Reid flung herself to the ground (CHAPTER V)

THE KIOWA KILLER

By JACKSON COLE

Like a rattler, this evil dealer in death gives warning of his approach—and his grim deeds terrorize Brasada County until the fighting Lone Wolf Ranger takes over!

CHAPTER I

Third Victim

AT LEAST twenty people must have seen Sheriff Todd Kramer seated at his checkerboard in the jail office, including old friends who waved and called a greeting to the grizzled Texas lawman as they passed the open door of the Brasada County Jail. Yet not one of them paused to wonder why Kramer didn't look up or answer them, or guessed the reason.

Sheriff Todd Kramer was dead.

Hunkered over his checker layout,

AN EXCITING COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

JIM HATFIELD GOES INTO ACTION WHEN

spurred boot heels hooked over the scuffed rung of his ancient cane-bottomed chair, one elbow on the table, his gnarled fist cupped under a lean jaw, rheumy eyes studying the checkers with blinkless concentration, Sheriff Todd Kramer's corpse looked lifelike enough.

Kramer had worn the law badge of Brasada County across a span of two generations, ever since the little cowtown had taken root at the old trail crossing on the Pecos. The advancing years had crooked his spine and filmed his eyes, but his gun hand was as sure as ever, and in Brasada County the cowfolk who cast the ballots required only nerve and gunslick in their sheriffs. Kramer had both.

So it was understandable why the fact of Kramer's killing went undetected, though his corpse sat in plain view of the traffic passing on the wheel-rutted main street. He was deaf in his off ear, which would account for his ignoring the calls of passing friends; and when Todd Kramer concentrated on a knotty checkerboard problem, you could fire a twelve-gauge shotgun under his nose without disturbing him.

The whole county knew about the sheriff's checker tournament with his deputy, "Boojum" Vozar, and "Red Jack" Skellet, the blind man who ran the locksmith and saddle shop on Tres Cruces Street. The three contestants had wagered their most cherished possessions on the outcome of the tournament.

Skellet was already out of the running, but not because he was blind. He had once held the checker championship of the Cherokee Strip against all comers, in the days before a bandit's bullet had destroyed his eyesight. He had wagered a handsome turnip watch that struck the hours and told the days of the month and the phases of the moon.

BOOJUM Vozar had bet a pair of silver dueling pistols which had come from England and dated back into medieval times. Sheriff Todd Kramer was staking a treasure he had guarded since his youth—a jewel-handled Mexican bayonet which Kramer had won on the battlefield at San Jacinto less than two months after the historic fall of the Alamo in San Antone.

The play-off between Kramer and his deputy had been raging for ten days now, with the score even up at eleven games each. The first player to achieve a dozen victories, not counting the innumerable draw games, would rake in the prizes.

As a result, Sheriff Todd Kramer had taken to spending his noon hours concocting new openings with which to match Boojum Vozar's prowess. All three contestants were past masters at the various standard openings which had come down through the centuries—the Ayrshire Lassie, the Dyke, Laird and Lady, the Old Fourteenth, the Switcher. It would take something new, something too original to be in the books, to save the San Jacinto bayonet and win Skellet's gold watch and Vozar's dueling pieces. And Kramer thought he had figured out a tricky opening which would defeat Boojum Vozar on this very day when death had struck him down—an opening which Kramer boastfully dubbed the Surefire.

Traffic moved along the main street of Brasada, unaware that tragedy had struck. A string of tandem-hitched mud wagons operating under the Big Seven Freighters franchise splashed across the chemical-bitter waters of the Pecos and drew up in front of the syndicate warehouses across the street from the jailhouse.

Cowboys from outlying ranches cantered into town, arriving early for their Saturday night spree at Brasada's saloons and gambling houses. The weekly Wells-Fargo stage for Lordsburg rumbled past the sheriff's office, its high yellow wheels throwing a cloud of dust which settled on Todd Kramer's fixed, glassy eyeballs and covered the checkerboard before him.

The rusty gears of the courthouse clock were clattering into position to chime the twelve strokes of high noon when Boojum Vozar, the deputy sheriff, called at Red Jack Skellet's shop where the blind man was waiting under the mammoth key

A SINISTER MYSTERY STALKS THE RANGE!

which served as his signboard.

"I seen Todd studying his checkerboard on my way over, Red Jack," chuckled the moon-faced deputy, linking his hand through the blind locksmith's arm.

Skellet was perfectly capable of making his way about the cowtown, from past memory of its landmarks and the uncanny skill which blind men acquire as a result of their affliction. He made faster time, however, if a guiding hand was ready to steer him past unsuspected chuckholes or away from unruly horses.

"Me, I'm neutral, Boojum," assured Red Jack. "But watch out for the sheriff's new openin' moves. If it's the shorefire thing he claims it is, yuh're goin' to get yore king row busted wide open before yuh know it."

Boojum Vozar laughed as they made their way up the spur-splintered board sidewalk toward the jail building. He had known Red Jack Skellet before that bushwhacker's slug had grazed his skull and damaged the optic nerve. But Skellet's courage had licked his affliction and increased the town's liking for the locksmith.

A rugged man crowding forty, with a leonine mane of iron-gray hair and cheeks like ripe pippins, Red Jack Skellet had formerly been a muleskinner for the Big Seven Freight Syndicate whose

JIM HATFIELD

wagons operated on a spider web of roads radiating out from Brasada. Outlaws had attacked a Big Seven wagon train in the Guadalupes, and Skellet had been the sole survivor among the wagoneers—but had paid for his life with the loss of his eyesight.

"Here we are," Vozar announced, as they turned in at the jail office. "There's the sheriff, still a-studyin' his layout. The old fakearoo must not be as shore of his new openin' as he brags he is, Red Jack."

Vozar and Skellet paused on the threshold of the sheriff's office, ex-

pecting the grizzled old star-toter at the table to make some profane comment in answer to Vozar's jibe. Instead, he kept staring at the dust-covered checkerboard, not even brushing away the bluebottle flies which crawled unheeded over his handlebar mustache and hawk-beak nose.

"Hey, Sheriff!" Vozar said in a loud voice. "Wake up, dang yore mangy hide! Red Jack's here to see me skin the pants off'n yuh in our final game. I already got hooks put in the wall over at my place for that San Jacinto bayonet of yore'n."

Vozar's voice trailed off into a shocked whisper. Texas sun rays, shafting in through the open doorway, caught a ruby droplet which fell like a dropping bead from a necklace to land on the splintery floor behind the sheriff's chair.

Staring, Boojum Vozar saw a little puddle of scarlet there, with flies feeding at its rim. It was blood!

Red Jack Skellet dug his fingers nervously into the deputy's forearm, sensing Vozar's alarm. Behind his smoked glasses the blind man's eyes shuttled up as if staring at the sudden bone-whiteness of Vozar's rotund face.

"What's wrong, Booj?" Skellet asked, whispering through some instinct as if he knew they stood in the presence of Death. "Why don't the sheriff answer? Is he here?"

Boojum Vozar licked his tongue across dry lips and disengaged himself from the blind man's grasp, sidling warily around the back of the sheriff's chair.

From that angle, he had a clear view of what passersby couldn't see from the street—the jewel-encrusted handle of Kramer's Mexican bayonet. The ten-inch, razor-whetted steel blade had been driven through Todd Kramer's broad back where the suspenders crossed, impaling him to the thin veneer panel on the chair back.

"Booj! Sheriff!" called out Skellet, waving his arms in sudden alarm and catching hold of the door casing. "Why don't somebody say somethin'?"

Vozar reached out as if to touch the bayonet handle, in the manner of a man who refused to believe the testimony of his own eyes. But there was no doubt as to Kramer's death. The bayonet's point jutted through the sheriff's calfhide vest.

"Kramer's—dead, Skellet," Vozar whispered. "Somebody run him clean through with that souvenir bayonet of his'n."

The blind man stiffened as if from the impact of a blow. For a full minute, the only sound inside the jail was the monotonous buzz of insects.

"Help me—to a chair, Booj!" Skellet asked piteously. "This news—makes me sick inside. Todd was my best compadre."

Vozar grabbed a rawhide-bottomed chair and slid it over beside the doorway, guiding Red Jack Skellet into it.

"Yuh reckon it's the Kiowa Killer's work?" Skellet asked hesitantly. "Is there—one of them notes—anywheres around?"

Dreading what he might find, Boojum Vozar crossed around behind the sheriff's corpse. From that angle, he saw the square of lemon-yellow cardboard which rested on one corner of the checkerboard, weighted down with a shotgun shell.

"Yeah. There's a note, Red Jack. Just like the others—writ with printer's type on yeller cardboard."

The blind man waited, finally scowled impatiently.

"Well, read it to me, yuh idjit!" he burst out. "What does this one say?"

The deputy sheriff picked up the yellow card gingerly. Like a newspaper headline, set in Condensed Gothic, the message read:

SHERIFF KRAMER MADE THE MISTAKE OF SENDING FOR A TEXAS RANGER TO DAB HIS LOOP ON THE KIOWA KILLER

The hush seemed to deepen in the death room, as Boojum Vozar finished reading.

CHAPTER II

Lone Wolf Ranger

THIS was the third time Brasada County had felt the vengeance of the unknown terrorist who had dubbed himself "The Kiowa Killer" and who invariably warned his intended victims beforehand of their approaching doom, giving them a chance to get out of Texas.

"First it was Rex Kohler—and then Mizzou Jaybeck," wheezed the blind man

Hatfield looked down at the inert form on the theater porch (CHAPTER XIX)

reminiscently. "And now pore old Todd! Did you know the sheriff had sent for a Texas Ranger to come here, Booj?"

The deputy mopped his face with the bandanna looped about his fat-wattled neck.

"Kramer said this Kiowa Killer might be too tough for him to handle," confessed Vozar in the abashed manner of a man who felt as if he were betraying a confidence. "But he never told me a Ranger was comin' to help run down the killer."

Red Jack Skellet, looking like a malevolent owl in his dark glasses, nodded thoughtfully.

"Ten to one the Kiowa Killer left the sheriff a note warnin' him to leave town," the blind man suggested, "and Kramer never let on to nobody he'd got it. He went ahead and called on the Rangers for help, regardless."

A clatter of hoofbeats roused the two men from their shocked detachment. Deputy Sheriff Vozar glanced out the open doorway, to see a handsome young stranger in the garb of the range stepping from stirrups and hitching a magnificent golden stallion at the jail hitchrack.

The stranger in cowboy clothes glanced at the sign over the jail office door, then crossed the board walk and stood at the foot of the steps, removing his Stetson to swat trail dust from his bullhide chaps.

"Are you Sheriff Kramer?" he asked Vozar.

"What can I do for yuh?" the deputy mumbled abstractly.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet yuh, Kramer." The stranger grinned, his green eyes twinkling. "My name is Hatfield. Jim Hatfield."

It was on the tip of Hatfield's tongue to add, "I'm the Ranger yuh sent for, Sheriff," when he caught sight of the word "DEPUTY" engraved on the fat man's law badge. Boojum Vozar, his mind still stunned by the shock of discovering Todd Kramer's dead body, stared at Hatfield without appearing to see him.

The name "Jim Hatfield" meant nothing to Vozar, but the stranger was of such striking appearance and dominant personality that even in this moment of their meeting, Vozar was impressed.

Standing well over six feet without benefit of the cleft-crown El Stroud sombrero and his Coffeyville half-boots, Hatfield had the wide shoulders and tapering waist to match his height. His every movement bespoke agility and reserve strength, as if steel thews were coiled beneath his sun-bronzed hide.

The Ranger's hair was crisp, and as black as a *zopilote's* wing. His eyes were the peculiar greenish hue of deep ice, cold and penetrating, but candid and not unfriendly withal. Hatfield's face had a deceptive sternish cast, due to his high-bridged nose and prominent chin.

"You ain't the sheriff, are yuh?" Hatfield asked, shifting the weight of the twin Colt .45s holstered at his flanks. "It's Toddhunter Kramer I'm looking for."

It was Red Jack Skellet who answered for the stupefied deputy.

"Yuh're lookin' at Kramer's deputy, stranger. Boojum Vozar. Yuh come a mite too late to see Todd Kramer, I reckon."

Jim Hatfield stepped to the threshold, inclining his head in a nod of thanks to Skellet, even as he saw by the man's blank features and dark glasses that he was blind.

"Thanks, amigo," Hatfield said. "Is—er—Kramer out of town?" As his pupils widened in the shadowy half-light of the jail office, his glance ranged over to the table where a whiskered oldster was seated, apparently concentrating on a checker game.

"That's—Todd Kramer," Vozar finally got out huskily.

HATFIELD reached in a pocket of his blue hickory shirt and drew out tobacco sack and book of wheatstraw cigarette papers. From where he stood, the rider could not see the bayonet haft which jutted from the corpse's back.

"Yuh want to watch that king in the double corner there, Sheriff," chuckled Hatfield, shaking tobacco into the trough of paper between his long, rope-callused fingers. "Assumin' yuh're the red, the black is fixin' to—"

Hatfield broke off, as Vozar stepped to one side and revealed the puddle of blood under the sheriff's chair. At the same instant, the stranger caught sight of the San Jacinto blade impaling Todd Kramer to the chair back.

"The sheriff's dead," Red Jack Skellet

spoke up, sensing the cause of Hatfield's sharp intake of breath. "Killed. The Kiowa Killer's struck again."

Moving automatically, Hatfield licked and tapered his quirly. Thoughts were churning in his head, but his green, gold-flecked eyes were inscrutable.

"Yuh've heard of the Kiowa Killer, Hatfield?" asked Boojum Vozar. "Or are yuh a stranger in Brasada? I can't recollect havin' seen yuh hereabouts."

Hatfield thrust the cigarette between his lips and shook his head.

"I'm just a tumbleweed, driftin' through," he said vaguely. "Come from over Austin way—but I've heard of the Kiowa Killer. I reckon everybody in Texas has heard of that fiend."

Boojum Vozar swabbed his perspiring face again. He seemed eager to talk, to relax the tension which had gripped him.

"This Kiowa Killer has killed three prominent citizens in Brasada County durin' the past year," the deputy said. "First it was Rex Kohler, the president of the Big Seven Freightin' corporation. They found his carcass swingin' from a cottonwood seven-eight miles up the Pecos. One of the Killer's yellow cards was pinned to Kohler's shirt."

Going to an old iron safe behind the sheriff's desk, the deputy spun the combination dial and opened the vault door. He turned back to Hatfield with an envelope, from which he took a rectangular yellow cardboard measuring some five by seven inches in size. He handed it to Hatfield, who read silently:

REX KOHLER DIDN'T HEED MY WARNING SO HE DREW A HANGROPE. SIX MORE TO GO BEFORE MY REVENGE IS FINISHED.
THE KIOWA KILLER

"Six more to go!" exclaimed Hatfield, handing the printed yellow card back to Vozar. "Then the sheriff here—"

"Is Number three," Red Jack Skellet put in. "Nobody knows who the Kiowa Killer is or what revenge he's after. Mizzou Jaybeck was the Killer's second victim. He run a land office here in Brasada. They found him with a double-bitted ax stickin' in his skull. Killed in his sleep, a couple weeks after we buried Rex Kohler."

Without speaking, Vozar took a second piece of yellow cardboard from the envelope and showed it to Hatfield. Printed in Condensed Gothic type with printer's black ink, the card found on Jaybeck's body was grimly brusque:

I WARNED JAYBECK TO LOCK UP HIS LAND OFFICE AND VAMOSE. HE DIDN'T. NOW HE AIN'T ABLE TO.
THE KIOWA KILLER

The handsome young stranger whose golden sorrel was hitched to the rail outside the jail handed the card back to Boojum Vozar without comment. Replacing it in the envelope, the deputy sheriff handed over the yellow card he had found on Todd Kramer's table.

Jim Hatfield read the latest card without any change of expression crossing his face. He glanced up at the pudgy deputy.

"Is it a crime for a sheriff to appeal to the Texas Rangers for help?" he asked. "I think yuh've got a madman on yore hands, Vozar. There's no way of knowing where this maniac will strike next."

VOZAR stuck Kramer's death card in the envelope and returned it to the safety vault.

"Oh, the killer warns his victims, usually by mail," Vozar said. "Kohler and Jaybeck both reported receivin' their warnin's, but figgered some cowpoke was tryin' to booger 'em. Didn't pay no attention to the warnin's."

Hatfield stared at the sheriff's corpse with brooding eyes.

"Did the sheriff receive such a warnin'?" he asked.

Vozar shrugged. "If he did, he didn't tell me. But yuh're mighty interested in this business for a stranger, Hatfield. What was yuh wanting to see my boss about, anyhow?"

Hatfield struck a match on a nickel tie concha of his chap leg and fired his cigarette.

Boojum Vozar would have been floored if he had glimpsed into Hatfield's brain at that instant. Vozar couldn't know it, but this tall young stranger in the doorstep knew as much about the Kiowa Killer case as the deputy himself. At that very moment, there reposed in a pocket of his bibless levis a yellow card printed by the Kiowa Killer, the card which had

been sent to Rex Kohler warning him to leave Texas or face hangrope doom.

It was obvious that the name Jim Hatfield meant nothing to the moon-faced deputy sheriff to whom the stranger had introduced himself a few minutes before. Hatfield had cursed himself for his carelessness in assuming that Vozar was the sheriff of Brasada County.

Elsewhere in Texas, the name of Jim Hatfield carried plenty of weight, especially along the owlhoot trails. For this black-haired stranger who had ridden into town on the golden sorrel was the famous "Lone Wolf," the top hand in Captain "Roarin' Bill" McDowell's Ranger troop at Franklin, the most feared Ranger in the Lone Star State.

It was to Captain McDowell that the late sheriff of Brasada County had appealed for help, begging the Ranger official to dispatch an entire company of Rangers to his beleaguered cowtown on the upper Pecos in an attempt to bring the mysterious Kiowa Killer to bay.

McDowell, after a thorough study of the case, had instead decided to dispatch his best law rider to Brasada to confer with Sheriff Todd Kramer, that Ranger being the Lone Wolf, Jim Hatfield. But fate had decreed that Todd Kramer would be the Kiowa's Killer's third victim, only a few hours before Hatfield reached his destination.

"I asked you," repeated Vozar harshly, "what yuh wanted to see the sheriff about, Hatfield?"

Before Hatfield could frame a reply, a jingle of spurred boots sounded on the boardwalk outside and he turned to see a girl and a young man in his mid-twenties turn off the street and head for the jail office.

The young couple were laughing and talking in the carefree manner of the young. And Jim Hatfield, with the extraordinary perception which his highly-trained senses had developed, knew immediately that this chestnut-haired girl was a blood relative of the dead sheriff.

Her eyes were the same hue as Todd Kramer's death-glazed orbs, the deep, fibrous beauty of Texas bluebonnets. The classic planes of her facial contours bespoke a hereditary link with the sheriff's craggy features.

The young man with her wore gray moleskin pants, a white shirt with black sateen sleeveguards at the wrists which marked him as a clerk or shopkeeper, and a flat-crowned marbled Stetson tilted back off a bush of carrot-colored hair.

"Howdy, Booj!" greeted the girl, pausing at the doorstep to flash the deputy a smile. "I see Gramp's giving that Surefire lead of his a final going over. He's dead set on beating you today, Booj."

Red Jack Skellet squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, recognizing the girl's voice. He started to speak, but the young man who had escorted the girl to the sheriff's office cut in with boisterous camaraderie in his voice:

"I've got five pesos bet on my future in-law, Boojum. No hard feelin's? We came over to see the final showdown game in this tournament of yores. Now that Red Jack's been eliminated, we figger—"

Boojum Vozar moved to the doorway, shouldering Jim Hatfield to one side. The deputy's blocky form completely filled the opening, cutting off their view of the seated corpse.

"You—you can't come in, Susan. The—the tournament's been called off permanent. Yore—yore grandpa—"

The deputy's voice choked off, overcome with emotion.

Hatfield saw the girl bring a clamped fist to her mouth, her eyes dilating as she read the horror in the deputy's face.

"Take her away from here, Bonesteel!" the blind man spoke harshly. "The Kiowa Killer's done in Susie's granddad!"

CHAPTER III

X Marks the Killer

IT TOOK the combined efforts of young Bonesteel and the burly lawman to coax the girl away from the Brasada County jail in the grief-stricken scene which followed. From comments dropped by the blind man seated beside the doorway, Jim Hatfield learned that the girl was Todd Kramer's only living relative, an orphaned granddaughter named Susan Reid, whose parents had been scalped by Kiowa warriors twenty years before.

Todd Kramer, sheriff of the budding

town of Brasada on the Loving-Goodnight cattle trail, had taken the girl to raise. Between them had been a devotion rarely equalled by father and daughter.

"She aims to marry that Ted Bonesteel hombre," Red Jack Skellet explained. "He's the operator over at the Overland Telegraph office. She works as a clerk in Josh Fenton's office in the courthouse —he's the county coroner."

News of Kramer's killing had spread through the cowtown by now and Jim Hatfield left the sheriff's office when it filled with cattlemen and buckskin-clad freighters, massed about the jail office for a glimpse of the Kiowa Killer's latest victim.

He read in their shocked faces and strained voices the affection with which they had regarded the doughty, eighty-year-old star-toter. A seething anger had gripped the town, but it had no outlet. There was talk of lynching, but it died a-borning against the stone wall of anonymity which surrounded the identity of the Kiowa Killer. How could you hang a killer who was nothing more tangible than a square of yellow cardboard with printed words on it?

Boojum Vozar returned to the jail building after helping the young telegrapher, Bonesteel, escort the bereaved girl to her home. With him was a tall, cadaverous man in a black fustian coat and stovepipe hat whom the Texas Ranger heard addressed as Josh Fenton. The funereal-looking man would be the county coroner, then, come to take charge of the sheriff's body.

The Lone Wolf was in the act of unhitching Goldy, his sorrel saddle horse, when he heard a harsh voice call his name from the outskirts of the crowd.

He turned, to see Deputy Sheriff Vozar striding toward him, a .45 six-gun clutched in a fist so fat it resembled an inflated rubber glove. Raw anger was blazing in Vozar's eyes.

"Not so fast, Hatfield!" roared the deputy, facing the Ranger across the chewed hitch-bar. "I plumb forgot you in all the ruckus. What's yore business in Brasada? What was yuh wantin' to see Sheriff Kramer about?"

A hush fell over the crowd of sombreroed townsmen as they saw their deputy thrust his six-gun against the

The rattler's beady eyes were fixed on Hatfield as it drew back its head to strike (CHAP. XI)

stranger's ribs. Jim Hatfield responded with an easy smile.

"I was aimin' to report the theft of a pack-hoss from my camp down the Pecos," he explained glibly, flicking his cigarette stub into the dirt. "Some hoss-thievin' son robbed me last night and I was honin' to get help from the nearest John Law I could find."

Hatfield's words had the ring of truth, though the Ranger had thought up the excuse on the spur of the moment. Sheriff Kramer had been killed because he had sent for a Texas Ranger, and Hatfield was that Ranger. He saw no reason for letting the cowtown know his secret just yet. His Ranger badge was kept in a cunningly concealed pocket inside his belt, and when the need arose he could readily produce his law star.

"How do I know yuh ain't lying?" blustered Boojum Vozar. "For all I know, mebbe you're the Kiowa Killer!"

A knot of muscle hardened on the corner of Hatfield's jaw. Vozar was panicky. His fat finger was on the hair-trigger of a cocked gun. The man was dangerous, not only because of his shaky nerves, but because, being Todd Kramer's successor, the deputy sheriff was eager to pin the guilt of Kramer's murder on someone; anyone.

Help came from an unexpected quarter in that moment.

"Cool off, Senor Booj!" spoke up a cool voice from the crowd. "Coroner Fenton says the sheriff was killed within the last hour. I can testify that this buckaroo was eatin' his bait out at my Box B cookhouse three hours ago. I rode into town with him."

HATFIELD shot the speaker a grateful look. He recognized the man as "Injun Jim" Buffalo, half-breed owner of a cattle ranch up the Pecos. The Ranger had tarried there en route to Brasada to get a meal under his belt.

"All right—I'll accept that alibi, seein' as it come from you, Injun Jim!" Vozar told the 'breed, pouching his six-gun. He flung Hatfield a scowl of distrust. "But I'm keepin' my eye on you, Hatfield. I'd suspect my own mother, as long as this Kiowa Killer is on the loose."

Hatfield swung into stirrups and rode off down the main street to the handiest livery barn, where he turned his mount over to a hostler with orders to groom and grain the sorrel.

Then, shouldering his warsack and saddle-bags, the Texas Ranger looked up the town's only hotel. Masquerading behind the high-sounding title of the Ritz Palace, the hotel was a rambling two-story clapboard structure sharing a block of the main street with what appeared to be a long-abandoned theater whose faded false front acclaimed it as the Brasada Grand Opera House.

In the privacy of a small room at the end of the upstairs hallway, the Lone Wolf sat down on the straw-ticked bed and rolled another cigarette.

Captain McDowell had given him little information to go on, assuming that Hatfield would get a full report on the Kiowa Killer from Sheriff Todd Kramer. The lawman's death, indirectly caused by Hatfield's assignment to the case, meant that the Lone Wolf was starting almost from scratch in what McDowell had warned him was one of the most baffling cases ever to confront the Texas Rangers.

Kramer's original call for help had been in the form of a telegraph message to Ranger headquarters a year ago, informing the Rangers of the killing of Rex Kohler, head of the Big Seven freight outfit. In all likelihood, that message had been sent by Ted Bonesteel, the young Overland Telegraph operator whom Hatfield had seen with Susan Reid, the sheriff's granddaughter.

Captain McDowell had taken no action on the matter at the time, having use for his available Rangers along the Mexican Border. Six months later, however, Sheriff Todd Kramer had sent a second appeal for help, this time mailing Captain McDowell two yellow cardboard squares which had warned the Kiowa Killer's victims of approaching doom.

The Lone Wolf took from his pocket the yellow cardboard message which Rex Kohler had received in the mail more than a year before. Printed in Condensed Gothic type which, unlike handwriting, offered no clue to its sender's identity, the Kiowa Killer's first warning had been brief, sinister:

YOU ARE MARKED FOR HANGROPE, KOHLER, ALONG WITH YOUR PARDS. LEAVE

TEXAS PRONTO OR FACE THE VENGEANCE OF

THE KIOWA KILLER

Studying the card, Jim Hatfield's eye kept returning to a malformation in the letter "X" in the word "Texas". The piece of metal type which the Killer had used in setting up the warning had evidently been damaged, for the upper right cross-arm of the X had a series of nicks in it which had not taken ink.

"Whoever the Kiowa Killer is, he obviously has access to a printshop," the Ranger mused. "A town as big as Brasada may have a newspaper or job-printing establishment. I wonder—"

Suiting action to thought, Hatfield donned his Stetson and left the Ritz Palace Hotel, emerging on the main street of the cowtown.

Brasada was typical in outward appearance of a hundred prairie towns Hatfield had visited in the Lone Star State. Most of its buildings were unpainted wooden shacks with tarpaper roofs and porch awnings, dating back to the period of the annual trail-drives when Brasada had been a hell-roaring cowboy capital, mecca of Loving-Goodnight trail drovers.

There was a courthouse with an ugly square clock tower, situated in a block-square plaza rimmed with scrubby palmettos and box alder trees. Saloons and gambling dives outnumbered stores and livery barns on a ratio of five to one.

YET Brasada differed from other Texas settlements in one vitally important respect. It was preeminently a headquarters settlement for employees of the Big Seven Freight Syndicate, whose barns, stock corrals and warehouses dominated the south outskirts of the town.

One of the largest business enterprises in Texas, the Big Seven sent its wagons ranging as far east as Austin, north to Oklahoma, south to the Rio Grande, and west as far as Arizona. Brasada had no railroad, and the Big Seven freight wagons supplied that lack.

Two-thirds of the dwelling houses in Brasada sheltered the families of Big Seven muleskinners and wagoneers. Brasada belonged to the Big Seven syndicate, where once it had been primarily a river-crossing town on the Loving-Goodnight Trail.

From the Negro stocktender at the livery barn, Hatfield made inquiry regarding a newspaper shop.

"Yassah, boss, we'all's got a newspaper in Brasada," the man boasted with obvious civic pride. "There 'tis yonder, the *Weekly Enterprise*. Harry Rockman's de edituh-man, but the paper belongs to Mars' Fenton de undertakuh."

Thanking the hostler, Jim Hatfield headed down the street past an ornate painted structure with stained-glass windows and the only brick facade in town. This was the Lone Star Saloon, and Hatfield made a mental note of the fact that it would probably be a fertile place in which to pick up information.

Crossing the intersection of Tres Cruces Street, the Lone Wolf paused in front of the two-story, ramshackle building which housed the Brasada *Enterprise*.

Finding the front door open, Hatfield entered the place.

He was confronted by a typical cow-country printshop. A herd of cows could have bedded down on the scrap paper which littered the floor. Behind the counter which partitioned off the business office was a shop crowded with stone-topped composing tables, a rickety flat-bed press powered by a rusty steam engine, an alley of type cases, a paper cutter which had a blade like a guillotine, and wall shelves crowded with paper stock, glue-pots, drums of printer's ink and other miscellany.

Receiving no answer in response to his call, the Ranger decided that Harry Rockman, the publisher, was no doubt over at the coroner's office getting the story about Sheriff Todd Kramer's death for his next edition.

If so, Hatfield probably had time to do a little investigating on his own.

Going behind the counter, Hatfield entered the alley of type cabinets, studying the labels which identified the font of type contained in each compartmented drawer.

The Ranger's heart pounded as he located a narrow drawer labeled "CONDENSED GOTHIC UPPERCASE". The printing was identical to the style of type used by the Kiowa Killer.

Pulling the drawer open, Hatfield

looked over the complicated arrangement of compartments containing the letters of the alphabet, punctuation marks, em quads, and other type.

"There shouldn't be many Xs in a font of type," the Ranger reasoned. "It shouldn't take long to find out if the Kiowa Killer does his printing here."

Not being familiar with the set-up of a case of type, it took the Ranger several minutes to locate the square box which contained around a dozen specimens of the letter "X".

It was but the work of a moment to learn that his hunch had paid off. One of Harry Rockman's Xs had a damaged upper right crossarm!

Hatfield slipped the damaged piece of type into a pocket of his bullhide chaps, slid the Condensed Gothic drawer closed, and turned—to find himself staring into the business end of a Dragoon Colt, pointed straight at his chest!

CHAPTER IV

Five Thousand Dollars Bounty

LIFTING his eyes from the lethal bore of the revolver, the Ranger found himself staring into the angry eyes of a stockily-built man in his late fifties, a man wearing a compositor's ink-stained apron. A green celluloid eyeshade was thrust back over a balding, shell-pink scalp.

"Are you a journeyman printer," snarled the gun-toter, "or a thief trespassin' on private property, stranger?"

Hatfield stiffened as he heard the Dragoon's hammer come to a full cock with an ominous, oily click.

"You'll be Harry Rockman," he said. "I—I apologize. As a matter of fact, I wanted to get some stud-hoss bills printed up and I was goin' over yore type to see what style I thought would look good."

"I'm Harry Rockman," the editor acknowledged, his face purpling with anger. "And you'll be a dead man if yuh don't rattle yore hocks out of here *pronto prontico*. I don't stand for strange bronc-stompers meddlin' around in my shop."

Realizing that it would be dangerous to anger the man further, and having accomplished what he had come for, the Lone Wolf sidled around the leveled six-gun and beat a hasty retreat out the front door. Harry Rockman, still glowering wth rage, stood on the sidewalk with his gun leveled until Jim Hatfield vanished inside the Ritz Palace Hotel, a block down the street.

Back in his hotel room, the Ranger took the piece of type from his pocket and checked it carefully against the damaged imprint of the letter "X" on the Kiowa Killer's death-warning to Rex Kohler.

The comparison left no room for doubt. The Killer had set up his grim yellow cards in the Brasada *Enterprise* shop. Even without a magnifying glass, Hatfield could see the exact duplication of the nicks and scratches on the type-face he had stolen from Harry Rockman's cabinet.

The Lone Wolf scratched his jaw thoughtfully. The discovery of this vital clue had come almost too easily. His new knowledge posed several questions, which might eventually give him the clue to the Kiowa Killer's identity.

Had Harry Rockman done the printing for the Kiowa Killer or was he the killer himself? Or had the killer used the *Enterprise* shop for his own diabolical purposes without Rockman's knowledge?

The questions whirled inside Hatfield's brain. He doubted if finding their answer would come as easily as had his discovery of where the Killer's messages were printed. In all probability, the solution of the Kiowa Killer riddle would have to be purchased at the expense of gunsmoke and blood. . . .

The customary Saturday night revelry was lacking in Brasada's saloons and dance halls after sundown this night. The black shroud of tragedy hung over the Pecos cowtown, for Sheriff Todd Kramer had been a popular figure in Brasada County for over forty years.

Even after seeing the old lawman's body resting in state in Josh Fenton's undertaking parlors, old friends had difficulty in realizing that Kramer's ebullient spirit had been extinguished forever, that an era had come to an end in Brasada.

Over in Kramer's big cupola-topped house on a bluff overlooking the Pecos River, Susan Reid found herself the focal

point of attention. It seemed that the entire population of Brasada, including total strangers, had made their way over to Kramer's residence to offer the sheriff's granddaughter their condolences.

Wearing a black silk dress with flowing skirts and puff sleeves in token of her mourning, Susan bore little resemblance to the girl in whipcord riding breeches and cream-colored sombrero who had visited the jail at noon. In contrast to the sable hues of her dress, the girl's throat resembled ivory and her face, pale under its tan, seemed as delicately modeled as a rare old cameo.

SORROWING housewives crowded the sheriff's parlor, overflowing the horsehair furniture. The big billiard room where Todd Kramer had entertained guests during past decades was crowded with spurred and chap-clad range riders, all of them discussing in hushed tones Brasada's latest tragedy.

Jim Hatfield mingled with the gun-hung mourners without attracting attention. The Ranger had followed the crowds from Josh Fenton's undertaking parlors to the Kramer home, keeping his eyes and ears open, avoiding conversations, and remaining inconspicuously in a corner.

He found himself sitting next to Red Jack Skellet. Of all the men in the room, the blind man seemed to have felt the sheriff's murder most keenly, for it had been Sheriff Kramer who had loaned Skellet the cash to set himself up in business as a keysmith and saddle-maker.

Dominating the room full of men was a tall, Lincolnesque figure who wore flashy diamond jewelry and a swallowtailed steelpen coat. Jim Hatfield, sizing up the man's fishbelly-white hands and pallid face with its V-shaped brows and black imperial beard, ticketed the man for a professional gambler. Events proved his hunch correct.

Hammering on the sheriff's billiard table with the butt-end of a cue, the frock-coated man climbed up on a chair and peered down at the faces about him.

"Men, I got an announcement to make," the man said. "As yuh all know, the late Sheriff Kramer was not exactly what I would call my best friend. We had our differences. But I'm not one to speak ill of the dead or hold grudges—"

A hum of angry voices filled the room.

"Yuh better set down before yuh say too much, Sam Wanda!" snarled Red Jack Skellet, his shoulder brushing against Jim Hatfield as the blind man leaned forward in his chair. "The whole town knows yuh hated the sheriff. Yuh say anything ornery about Todd Kramer an' yuh'll find yoreself doin' a cottonwood jig!"

The Lone Wolf Ranger eyed the speaker with new interest. Sam Wanda, he had learned earlier in the day, was Brasada's wealthiest citizen, and owner of the big Lone Star Saloon on the main street.

Wanda flushed, aware of the hostility which was mounting against him.

"Don't get me wrong, *amigos*!" the saloonkeeper apologized hastily, his slim fingers fumbling with the diamond-studded horseshoe pin in his silk cravat. "What I meant to say was that Brasada lost a fine citizen when the Kiowa Killer struck down our sheriff. And I, for one, aim to do somethin' about it."

A steely silence greeted Wanda, but

[*Turn page*]

... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT!

Hatfield was aware of a subtle change in the crowd. It was obvious that the rich saloon owner was making a bid for the favor of his listeners. Red Jack Skellet settled back in his chair, mollified by what Sam Wanda had said.

"Nobody knows who this Kiowa Killer is, or why he's out to murder seven victims," the gambler continued. "I want Brasada County to know that I here an' now agree to post a five-thousand-dollar cash bounty at the Stockman's Bank payable to anybody who dabs his loop on this Kiowa Killer!"

Hatfield nodded to himself approvingly. Money talked in this lawless corner of Texas. Now that the Kiowa Killer packed a $5,000 reward on his topknot, the way had been paved for treachery in case the killer had any friends. More than one outlaw had been betrayed by a partner for a smaller reward than the one Sam Wanda was offering.

"That's all I wanted to say, neighbors," Wanda said, climbing down off the chair. "That cash reward stands until the Kiowa Killer has been brought to justice. For all I know, the sidewinder may be right in this room listenin' to my words!"

Red Jack Skellet grunted and said:

"If he is, Wanda, yuh've signed yore death-warrant. I'll lay odds yuh'll be the killer's next victim, if yuh're on his list or not."

JIM HATFIELD got to his feet and moved off through the crowd. He was doing plenty of thinking on his own hook. Total stranger though he was, the Ranger had appraised Sam Wanda as a dangerous man, one whose temperament might easily jibe with that of the Kiowa Killer himself. It was not an uncommon ruse for an outlaw to post a reward for his own capture, in cases where his identity was a mystery.

Moving unnoticed through the crowded billiard room, the Lone Wolf went into the parlor, where Susan Reid was accepting the condolences of her grandfather's host of friends. The only man in the room whom Hatfield recognized was Ted Bonesteel, the red-headed operator from the Overland Telegraph. As Susan's fiance, Bonesteel was hovering in the background.

Seizing an opportunity when the girl had accompanied an elderly couple to the front door of the sheriff's home, Hatfield strode over to where Susan Reid stood.

"I beg yore pardon, miss—"

The girl started, turning her wide blue gaze upon the stranger who towered above her.

"I—I've seen you before, sir," she said huskily, "but I— My mind is so mixed up— I can't think of your name."

Hatfield smiled gravely. When he spoke, his voice was pitched low for her ears alone.

"I've just come to Brasada, Miss Reid. Your grandfather sent for me. Mebbe this will identify me."

The girl glanced down to where Hatfield's hands were holding his sombrero. Hidden by the Stetson, the Ranger's right hand was holding a silver star with its points circumscribed by a silver ring—the honored emblem of the Texas Rangers.

Even as she caught sight of the law badge, Hattfield's fingers closed over the metal star.

"Oh, then you're the Ranger Gramp sent for before he—"

Hatfield nodded.

"Yuh saw me at the sheriff's office at noon, Miss Reid. I got there too late to talk things over with yore grandfather. But it is urgent that I talk to yuh—alone. Yuh can mebbe give me some information no one else in Brasada could give me. But above all, nobody in town must learn I am a Ranger."

Susan nodded, glancing around the vestibule to make sure no one was within earshot.

"I'll meet you out in Gramp's rose garden in ten minutes," she whispered. "It's on the river side of the grounds. I'll make sure no one sees me slip out of the house."

Susan Reid returned to her guests in the parlor. Mourners were leaving the Kramer house singly and in pairs and larger groups, having done what they could to comfort the sheriff's granddaughter in her hour of sorrow.

Leaving the house with a group of cowpunchers, Jim Hatfield moved off into the darkness as if heading for the spot where he had hitched his horse. Instead, he doubled around the east wall of Kramer's white-painted Victorian home and

made his way into a spacious, hedge-walled garden where the fragrance of rosebushes cloyed the night air.

Off to the left, the Pecos burbled over its muddy bottom, at the foot of the bluff. The lights of Brasada twinkled beyond the house, rivaling the glory of the Texas stars.

CHAPTER V

Knife in the Dark

SUSAN REID slipped out through a side entrance into the garden a few minutes later, guided to the Ranger's side by the glowing pink coal of his cigarette. She halted close enough to Hatfield for his nostrils to detect the aroma of her hair, his ears picking up the swishing susurrus of her silk skirts.

"My name's Hatfield," he whispered. "Jim Hatfield. Captain McDowell assigned me to this Kiowa Killer case at yore grandfather's request."

Susan gripped the Ranger's arm in the darkness.

"Jim Hatfield!" she breathed. "I've heard of you many times, Jim. You're called the Lone Wolf, aren't you? I know Gramp hoped that Captain McDowell would send you to Brasada."

Hatfield flushed, embarrassed by the tone of hero-worship in the girl's soft voice.

"What I want to know is this, Miss Reid," he said tersely. "Did the sheriff let anybody know he had sent for the Rangers?"

"No," she answered after a brief pause. "But of course the Kiowa Killer's message found on Gramp's checkerboard told everyone why he was killed."

Hatfield crushed out his cigarette stub underfoot.

"That's right. I hate to ask these questions even before yore grandfather's funeral, Miss Reid, but I've got to work fast before the Kiowa Killer has a chance to strike again. Tell me: have you yoreself any idea who the killer is? Did the sheriff ever tell a suspicion to yuh?"

The girl's face was a pale oval in the starlight. Hatfield knew she was struggling to control her emotions.

"Frankly, Gramp was completely baffled," she said. "No one in Brasada County has the faintest idea who the killer can be. If Gramp had suspected anyone, I'm sure he would have discussed it with me. We were very close."

Hatfield decided on another angle.

"Did the sheriff have any enemies?"

"Gramp could count everyone who knew him as a friend, Jim Hatfield."

"How about Sam Wanda?"

The girl drew in a quick breath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sam Wanda was a bitter enemy of Gramp's. You see, there have been so many shooting scrapes in Wanda's saloon that Gramp threatened to padlock the place and banish Wanda from Brasada. Wanda—Wanda even threatened to kill Gramp, but no one ever took the threat seriously. Sam Wanda blusters a lot, but he's never killed a man to my knowledge."

Even though he appeared to be concentrating his every faculty on the girl's low-voiced words, Jim Hatfield's senses had picked up an alien sound in the night.

Something—a foraging armadillo, perhaps—was moving through the dry grass on the opposite side of the hedge from the spot where they stood. It was a tiny sound, a stealthy whisper of movement, almost lost under the trill of tree toads in the magnolias of the garden, but to Jim Hatfield, trained by long years of riding the danger trails of Texas, those alien noises rang a warning bell in his brain.

"Miss Reid," the Ranger whispered, moving closer to the girl, "don't cry out or let on I'm tellin' yuh anything unusual—but I think somebody's eavesdroppin' on us. Other side of the hedge here."

The girl stiffened, holding her breath as she heard the faint scrape of steel on leather as the Lone Wolf eased a cedar-butted Peacemaker from holster.

"I want yuh to drop flat on the ground, without warnin'," the Ranger whispered. "Just in case our prowler gets spooky and squeezes off a wild shot. Understand?"

The girl nodded. She had sensitive hearing, but no hint of menace had come to her from beyond the hedge.

"When?" she asked, her whisper betraying a slight tremor.

"Now!"

AS HE spoke, Jim Hatfield did a frog-hop to one side, moving simultaneously as Susan Reid flung herself to the ground and lay motionless, her black dress making her invisible against the smooth-clipped grass of the yard.

"Come out of there with yore hands up, hombre!" the Ranger lashed out, swinging into a gunhawk's crouch. "I got yuh covered!"

There was a hissing sound behind the hedge, as the unseen prowler gasped a breath across his teeth.

A flicker of heat lightning off to the north gave Jim Hatfield a pinched-off glimpse of a sombreroed figure crouched behind the rosebush, one arm drawn back as if in the act of throwing something.

Then starlight made a long silvery streak as a hard-flung knife blade sped arrowlike over the top of the low hedge, aimed straight as a bullet toward the Ranger's chest.

Instinct caused the Lone Wolf to twist his body sideward, dropping to one knee in the same motion. The eavesdropper's *cuchillo* haft grazed Hatfield's temple and thudded into the bole of a sycamore tree behind him, the blade twanging like a plucked harp string.

Susan stifled a cry of alarm as the Ranger crashed headlong through the thin hedge. But no shot rang out; only the swift drumming of the knifeman's feet, sprinting around the corner of the house in getaway.

For an instant Hatfield had held the prowler's silhouetted figure under his gunsight, as the running figure crossed the lighted windows of the Kramer house. But he dared not shoot, for if his bullet missed its target it would smash through the window and bring sure death to some of the women crowded inside the Kramer parlor.

By the time Hatfield got to the corner of the house, there was no way of telling which way the knife-thrower had gone. The night had swallowed him.

Susan was still lying on the ground when the Ranger returned.

"Whoever it was, he got away," Hatfield said, helping the girl to her feet. "If it was the Kiowa Killer, then he probably knows our secret, Miss Reid. I'm sorry I exposed yuh to danger."

Striding over to the sycamore tree, Hatfield tugged the knife from the smooth yellow bark. It was imbedded a good six inches in the soft wood, its blade honed razor-sharp.

Leading Susan over to a window, Hatfield found that the knife was not a bowie, but an ordinary butcher knife.

"Why, that was Gramp's!" Susan exclaimed. "That prowler must have picked it up off the kitchen table when he followed me out into the garden!"

Hatfield took the girl through a side door into Kramer's kitchen, and tossed the knife on a table.

"Yuh'll be wantin' to get back to yore guests," he said. "Don't say anything about this little ruckus. And if yuh need me, I'll be staying in Room Thirteen at the Ritz Palace till the Kiowa Killer has been corraled."

Bidding the girl good night, Hatfield left the Kramer home and headed across the sage flats toward Brasada's main street, passing groups of mourners, both men and women, who were returning to their homes.

Midway, he overtook Red Jack Skellet, who was groping his way along the path with his white cane. Even before Hatfield knew the man's identity, Skellet greeted him.

"Yuh're Jim Hatfield, ain't yuh?" Skellet inquired. Then, sensing the Ranger's surprise, Skellet laughed softly. "Yuh wonder how I knew it was you?" the blind man asked. "When an hombre loses the use of his eyes, his other senses get keener. I got a memory for footsteps, spur jingles—they all sing a different tune, to a blind man. I recognized the rattle of yore rowels, Hatfield."

THE RANGER fell in step beside the blind man as they reached the end of Tres Cruces Street, Skellet shouldering his cane and linking his arm through Hatfield's for guidance.

"Yuh take yore—affliction mighty brave, Skellet," Hatfield complimented. "I admire your nerve."

Skellet laughed philosophically.

"That is because only five thousand dollars stands between me and regaining my eyesight," he said. "I've already had one operation in New York. The medicos say another operation will relieve the pressure of scar-tissue against my optic

nerve, and that some day I'll be able to see again."

Hatfield eyed the saddlemaker with new interest.

"I understand yuh was blinded by a bullet graze when owlhooters attacked a Big Seven wagon yuh was drivin', Skellet," he said. "Shorely the syndicate would loan yuh five thousand dollars, under the circumstances."

Skellet shook his head emphatically.

"I ain't the stripe to take charity," he said stubbornly. "The Big Seven offered me the money, but I've got an up-and-comin' business of my own. It won't be too long before I've got enough dinero saved up to make my second trip to New York."

They had reached the Brasada *Enterprise* building, and Red Jack Skellet halted at a doorway entering on a stairway to the upper story. A sign fashioned like a giant key, with Skellet's name on it, told the Ranger this was his place of business.

"I live upstairs, Hatfield," Skellet said, offering his hand. "In case yuh ever need a new kak, let me quote yuh an offer on a custom-built Skellet Special with silver trim."

"*'Sta bueno,*" Hatfield laughed. "I shore will, amigo. Good night."

He left Skellet at his doorway and walked on to the main street, pausing there indecisively. He mused vaguely on the blind man's discretion in not asking him questions.

His near escape from death over at the Kramer garden served to warn Hatfield that he was on one of the most dangerous cases of his entire career. There was little doubt in his mind but that his eavesdropper had been the Kiowa Killer.

Pausing in front of the newspaper shop, Hatfield deposited his Ranger badge in the secret pocket inside his belt. Then he headed for the hotel, conscious of a weariness which penetrated deep in his bones.

Passing the Lone Star Saloon, the Lone Wolf Ranger obeyed a vagrant impulse and shouldered his way into the establishment.

If Sam Wanda had been the sheriff's worst enemy, perhaps it would be well to visit Wanda's place on this night when the killing of Sheriff Kramer was still uppermost in the town's mind.

Entering the barroom, Hatfield was struck by the elegance of Wanda's saloon. Crystal chandeliers hung from the oak ceiling beams, dozens of lamps filling the saloon with vivid light. The floor, cleanly swamped, was of polished hardwood, in contrast to the sawdust-sprinkled puncheons of most Texas barrooms.

One wall was given over to roulette wheels, chuck-a-luck cages, faro layouts and other gambling devices.

A dance hall of generous proportions was visible through an archway at the far end of the barroom, but its shiny maple floor was empty tonight. A sign tacked prominently over the archway was readable from the batwings:

NO DANCING WILL BE ALLOWED UNTIL AFTER SHERIFF KRAMER'S FUNERAL.
Sam Wanda, Prop.

Making his way to the polished mahogany bar counter, Jim Hatfield had no difficulty in finding a place at the brass rail. He ordered rye from the *mestizo* bartender and while he was waiting to be served, the Ranger let his green eyes study the barroom, questing for a glimpse of Sam Wanda.

He located the Lincoln-faced proprietor at a poker table in a far corner, where a desultory game of stud was in progress. Obviously, the killing of Todd Kramer had quenched the usual Saturday night festivities of the trail town.

CHAPTER VI

Marked for Boot Hill

HATFIELD became aware of the fact that he was standing next to Josh Fenton, the somber-visaged coroner of Brasada County. Fenton was toying with a whisky glass, making wet rings on the bar before him. He was conversing with a swarthy, black-maned rancher whom Hatfield recognized as Injun Jim Buffalo, owner of the Box B spread where Hatfield had eaten his noon meal, the same rancher who had accompanied him into town.

"This Kiowa Killer must be somebody

right close to the Sheriff," Buffalo was saying. "Else how did he get wise to the fact that Kramer had asked the Texas Rangers for help?"

Hatfield dropped a silver cartwheel on the bar to pay for his drink. Without appearing to do so, he listened closely for the undertaker's reply.

"Between you and me, Injun Jim," Fenton remarked, his voice thickened by too much liquor, "Boojum Vozar is the man to watch. As Todd's deputy, he could have stood behind the old man while Todd was playin' checkers, and stabbed him in the back."

Studying the men's images in the backbar mirror, Hatfield saw Injun Jim Buffalo's flint-black eyes narrow thoughtfully.

"Another thing that points to Vozar," the coroner went on confidentially, "is that it's well-known that Boojun has been hankerin' to be sheriff for years now. Ever since he lost to Kramer in the last election he's had a chip on his shoulder the size of a saw log. Now that Kramer's dead, Vozar's as good as elected sheriff."

The Indian half-breed shook his head doubtfully.

"Vozar might have stabbed the sheriff," the Box B rancher agreed tentatively, "but that don't account for the killin' of Rex Kohler and Mizzou Jaybeck. No, Josh, we ain't got proof enough to hang Vozar by a long shot."

Hatfield sipped his drink thoughtfully. All up and down the barroom, little groups of men were discussing the Kiowa Killer's latest outrage in hushed tones. Their idle speculations would probably be of little use to the Ranger in his investigation—just cowtown saloon gossip. Every man in Brasada was under suspicion by his neighbors; a fact which was the Kiowa Killer's most potent shield against discovery.

Turning away from the bar, Hatfield avoided the bold invitation in the glance of a sequin-spangled dance girl who was trying to catch his eye. He headed for the street door, intending to return to the hotel and get some much-needed rest.

In the act of pushing through the batwings, the Ranger fell back to avoid being bowled over by Boojum Vozar, who slammed into the barroom at a run. Stark horror was stamped across the deputy's round face, now bleached to the color of a banana peel. Drops of cold sweat dewed his porcine jowls, dribbling down his neck like molten wax.

"He's after me!" bellowed the fat lawman, his voice a squawk of sheer terror. "The Kiowa Killer's pegged me for Boot Hill!"

Within the space of five clock ticks, Jim Hatfield found himself caught in the rush of humanity surrounding the gasping deputy. Men stood tense, guns palmed, staring at the fanning doors of the saloon as if they expected the fiendish killer to stalk into the Lone Star at any instant.

"Get a grip on yoreself, Booj!" shouted Sam Wanda, lifting a flap in the bar and taking a bottle from a shelf under the counter. "Wait—I'll pour yuh a drink. Yuh need it, son."

Boojum Vozar staggered over to the bar, gratefully accepting a jigger of amber liquor which Wanda had poured for him. For the first time, the Lone Wolf saw the square of yellow cardboard which Vozar was clutching in a palsied hand.

"Now, give us the lowdown, Booj!" said Wanda, refilling the deputy's glass. "Talk slow and drink deep. What's wrong?"

Boojum Vozar dropped the yellow cardboard on the bar in front of Sam Wanda. The deputy's lips worked, but no sound came. He jabbed a trembling forefinger at the card.

Sam Wanda picked up the card and read in a hushed voice:

YOU'RE NEXT, VOZAR! LEAVE BRASADA TONIGHT OR YOU WON'T BE ALIVE WHEN THE SUN RISES IN THE MORNING.

THE KIOWA KILLER

A DEATHLIKE hush descended over the Lone Star barroom as Wanda finished reading the four lines of Condensed Gothic type, the printer's ink still wet from the press. Wanda shuddered in spite of his iron will-power.

"That n-note was t-tacked on the door of the j-jail!" Vozar squealed. "It was p-put there sometime in the past hour. It wasn't there when I locked up the sheriff's office but it was there when I c-came back from Susie Reid's house just now."

Jim Hatfield's spine tingled. The tension which gripped the barroom was contagious. One of Wanda's silken-gowned dance hall girls uttered a piercing scream and slumped in a dead faint in the door-

way of the dance hall, her body lying sprawled there unnoticed.

It was Josh Fenton, the coroner, who broke the hush following Vozar's stammered disclosure.

"The Kiowa Killer always warns his intended victims," Fenton commented, his voice the funereal monotone assumed by undertakers the world over. "Yore course is plumb plain, Vozar. Saddle up and light a shuck out of Brasada. And don't come back."

Pale-visaged cowpunchers and buckskin muleskinners nodded their heads in agreement with the coroner.

"Hold on, Josh!" spoke up Sam Wanda. "Vozar is the only star-toter in town. It's Vozar's duty to stick this out."

Fenton's mouth twisted in an ugly smile.

"Kohler and Jaybeck and the sheriff stuck it out after the killer warned 'em to leave town," reminded the coroner, "and they're permanent residents in Boot Hill. I'm not anxious to get any more of the killer's business in my undertakin' parlors, gents."

Jim Hatfield loosened his six-guns in holsters, scowling thoughtfully. As a Texas Ranger, his duty was clear-cut. The time had come for him to declare his identity, to reassure Brasada's citizens that their town would not be left without a representative of the law in the event of Boojum Vozar's flight.

Clearing his throat in the act of speaking, Hatfield was interrupted by Sam Wanda. With an urbane smile, the big gambler dropped an arm over Vozar's husky shoulder and spoke to the saloon crowd.

"This is somethin' Booj will have to decide for himself." He consulted the clock over the backbar mirror. "It's now ten-fifteen. Some time between now and sunrise, the Kiowa Killer will strike. I'm shore not one of us in Brasada tonight would think it cowardly if Vozar decides to leave town. We'd do the same if we was in his shoes."

Boojum Vozar shook himself like a sheepdog emerging from a river. From unguessed wellsprings of courage deep within him, the deputy sheriff drew the strength to calm his hysteria.

"I—I ain't leavin' town," he panted huskily. "With Todd Kramer not even buried, it—it wouldn't be fittin'. I reckon I can take care of myself for the rest of the night."

Vozar's voice trailed off on an unconvincing note, but he had delivered his ultimatum and with it had recovered his badly shaken self-respect.

Jim Hatfield edged over to Vozar's side.

"I'm a stranger in Brasada," he said gravely, "but I have a suggestion to offer if yuh'll let me."

All eyes turned, focused on the handsome young Ranger. Vozar's eyes blazed behind their hammocks of fatty tissue as he recognized the rider who had presented himself at the sheriff's office a few minutes after their discovery of Kramer's murder.

"Yore *habla* had better be good, Hatfield!" growled the deputy, dropping pudgy hands to his gun-butts. "I ain't so shore but what yuh belong behind bars, just to be on the safe side. Just because Jim Buffalo cleared yuh of Kramer's stabbin'—"

The Lone Wolf's face tautened.

"You are the one who belongs behind bars, Vozar. For yore own safety."

HATFIELD'S listeners gasped. The Ranger was aware of Sam Wanda's hard scrutiny, as the saloonman tried to make sense out of the strange buckaroo's cryptic statement.

"Meanin' what, stranger?" Wanda demanded.

Hatfield jabbed a thumb at the yellow cardboard which Wanda was holding.

"The Killer's warnin' has a time limit on it. If Vozar is still alive at sunrise tomorrow, I've got a hunch the killer's sense of drama will make him send Vozar still another warnin' before he strikes again. It's plain enough that the Kiowa Killer is a man with a plumb twisted mind, else he wouldn't send these here printed notices to the men he aims to make his victims."

The hostility ebbed visibly from Vozar's rotund face.

"I get it," he said hoarsely. "I get what yuh mean about me bein' behind bars for my own good. If I lock myself up in the jail, surround the calaboose with guards I can trust, the killer won't be able to make good his threat before sunrise!"

Having once planted the germ of his idea in the deputy's head, Jim Hatfield's

part in the scheme was finished.

Within a minute's time, Boojum Vozar was headed down the main street toward the jail building, surrounded by a cordon of guards of his own choosing.

Hatfield joined the saloon mob which made the exodus to the jail where Todd Kramer had met his death that morning, half-expecting the unknown Kiowa Killer to try a bushwhack shot before his intended victim reached the shelter of the county jail.

Arriving at Kramer's office, Vozar took command of the situation, giving crisp orders to Sam Wanda and the coroner to organize the all-night guard. Then the deputy carried a lantern into the cell block and made positive that the brick-walled building was empty.

Vozar then proceeded to lock the front door of the sheriff's office from the inside, bolting it in addition. He closed the iron door leading from Kramer's office to the jail proper, locking it with keys he was careful to keep in his own possession.

Thus ensconced inside the fortresslike calaboose which had been built with three-foot-thick walls to withstand the assault of the most determined lynch mob in past times when necktie parties were common in the trail town, Boojum Vozar locked himself inside a steel-barred cell which had no window or other opening.

Meanwhile, Coroner Josh Fenton had taken charge of the preparations outside the jail building. Selecting trusted individuals whose courage and marksmanship were well-known, the coroner posted guards every six feet around the exterior of Brasada County's bastile.

"There!" announced the coroner, his somber face registering grim satisfaction in the glow of lanterns. "Vozar won't budge until the sun is two hours high tomorrow. Unless the Kiowa Killer is a ghost, he'll find it kind of hard to carry out that death warnin' of his."

It was obvious to Jim Hatfield that Brasada's residents intended to wait out the night in the vicinity of the jail where Deputy Sheriff Boojum Vozar had holed up in defiance of the mysterious assassin's threat. As Fenton had pointed out, it was not humanly possible for Vozar to fall victim to a bullet or club or knife as long as he remained behind triple barriers of steel and brick.

CHAPTER VII

Sunrise in Brasada

WANDA walked through the weeds behind the jail until he came to a small iron-barred window high overhead, which gave ventilation to the jail cells.

"Yuh all right in there, Booj?" called the gambler.

Vozar's cheery voice reassured the tense crowd outside the calaboose.

"Fit as a fiddle, Sam. The killer would have to blow the jail up to get me now."

Wanda looked startled, having overlooked the possibility of the fantastic Killer putting dynamite under Vozar's cell. Then he relaxed. The jail's foundations rested on bedrock.

"Don't let anybody in during the night, not even your own mother!" Wanda shouted a warning. "We'll see to it that nobody gets close to the jail door from the outside."

Vozar's chuckle came from the loophole-like jail window. "No chance, Sam. I got my keys and the sheriff's keys, and I'm settin' on 'em till daylight. Come mornin', I'll set you fellers up to the drinks."

Satisfied that Boojum Vozar was as safe as was humanly possible, Jim Hatfield left the crowd and walked down the deserted street of the cowtown to the ramshackle Ritz Palace. He found the lobby deserted even by the desk clerk, who no doubt was in the crowd which, by sheer mass of numbers, formed an impenetrable ring around the county jail.

Hatfield took his room key off a hook labeled "13," and headed up the stairs. He found the upper hallway dark, except for cracks of light coming from under doorways where hotel tenants, unaware of the drama over at the jailhouse, were preparing to retire for the night.

Groping his way to the door of Room 13 at the end of the hall, Hatfield unlocked his room and stepped inside.

The whistling sound of an object zipping through space was the Ranger's first hint of peril awaiting him. He leaped back instinctively, hand plummeting to gun-butt.

Then a gun barrel crashed against his

skull and the Ranger's brain seemed to explode. A black vortex whirled about him, engulfing his senses. He was not conscious of sprawling in a heap on the bedroom floor. . . .

Consciousness returned to the lawman a few minutes later. His instinctive dodging movement had saved him from a crushed skull and certain death. Pulling himself to his feet, Hatfield peered back down the corridor. It was deserted.

Closing and locking his door, the Ranger fumbled on the dresser until he found the coal-oil lamp there. Thumbing flame from a match, he lighted the wick and set the glass chimney in its brass-pronged bracket.

Then, in the act of adjusting the wick, Hatfield froze.

A message had been scribbled in block letters across the bulbous glass chimney of the lamp, letters written with a stub of tallow candle or a lump of beeswax:

TEXAS RANGERS COME TO BRASADA AT THEIR OWN RISK, HATFIELD! LEAVE TOWN. YOU'RE KNOWN TO
THE KIOWA KILLER

Even as the Ranger stared, he saw the waxen letters waver and turn liquid on the heated glass chimney. Then the Kiowa Killer's scribbled warning was a mere wisp of smoke in his nostrils.

Cold perspiration beaded Hatfield's pores. He pressed fingertips to the sticky welt on his skull, wondering if the pistol-whipping were causing him to have hallucinations.

Staring closer, he saw that the lamp chimney was crystal clear. But the odor of frying was still cloying the room and a little beadlet of gray oil was drooling down onto the fuel bowl.

"That was the Kiowa Killer I bumped into!"

The realization sent an imaginary icicle sliding down the Ranger's backbone. Whirling, he crossed the room and jerked open a closet door, gun in hand. A fusty, cobwebby odor assailed his nose. The closet was deserted. The room was empty.

Going over to the window, Hatfield leaned over the sill.

FIFTEEN feet from the wall of the cowtown hostelry were the weather-beaten clapboards of the Grand Opera House, its broken windows staring like sightless eyes in a corpse. Below was the narrow alley between the two buildings. Overhead was a ribbon of Texas sky, powdered over with myriad stars.

"He must have had a duplicate key to my room—there isn't any ladder down there, that's for certain."

A sense of frustration, of lost opportunity, came in waves over the Ranger. For a single second, the Kiowa Killer had been within point-blank range of his guns. Now that priceless chance was gone. The Killer had made his escape, perhaps assuming his victim was dead with a crushed skull.

But how had the Kiowa Killer known that he was a Ranger? Had he overheard enough of the conversation with Susan Reid? Captain McDowell had not notified Sheriff Todd Kramer that he was sending the Lone Wolf to Brasada, so the sheriff could not have told anyone.

On the other hand, Hatfield's name and reputation as a tophand Ranger were

[*Turn page*]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

known the length and breadth of Texas.

"Gettin' into this room was simple enough," Hatfield muttered to himself in the gloom. "Nobody was in the lobby, and all the killer had to do to find my room number was to look at the register on the clerk's desk. But it's shore he had a key to this room, else a skeleton key."

Hatfield washed the blood off his temple and blew out the lamp. Then he tugged off his Coffeyvilles and chaps and shirt. He unbuckled his gun harness and hung the shell belts over a chair back close to his bed, putting one Colt .45 under his pillow.

Then, as an added precaution, the Ranger shoved the big dresser against the hall door. A catlike sleeper, he knew he would be roused if the killer put a ladder against the alley window during the night.

He had arrived in Room 13 almost in time to catch the Kiowa Killer in the act of writing the death warning on his lamp chimney. From now on, he would be under the constant threat of death from an unknown hand. There was little need now to keep his Ranger star hidden inside his belt. On the morrow, he would wear it in plain sight.

Stretching out under the soogans, the Ranger reviewed the day's events, probing for some glimmer of truth that might point toward a specific suspect.

The Kiowa Killer's death notices had been set up with type at the Brasada *Enterprise* shop, he was positive. Harry Rockman was the only printer in town. Hatfield recalled with a start that the newspaper editor was one of the guards Wanda had chosen for the cordon which even now was patrolling the outside of the jail where Boojum Vozar awaited the sunrise deadline which the Kiowa Killer had put on his life.

Hatfield ticked off the other personalities he knew by name and face in Brasada.

Sam Wanda, the saloonkeeper who was the town's most powerful citizen, Todd Kramer's avowed enemy. Josh Fenton the coroner, who, incidentally, was part owner of Harry Rockman's newspaper, according to the hostler at the livery stable.

Ted Bonesteel, the telegrapher, Susan Reid's intended husband. Was it possible that Captain Bill had telegraphed the news of Hatfield's coming to the sheriff, while the Ranger was en route? Knowing McDowell, Hatfield doubted that. But Bonesteel was in a position to read any confidential message McDowell might have sent the ill-fated sheriff.

Red Jack Skellet? On the face of it it seemed fantastic to suspect a blind man of being the Kiowa Killer, but on the other hand it was inside the realm of possibility that a blind man could have hanged Rex Kohler, chopped Mizzou Jaybeck's head open with an ax while he slept, or thrust a Mexican bayonet into Todd Kramer's back.

Boojum Vozar—but the fat deputy was himself marked for death before tomorrow's sunrise. Unless that threat was a ruse to draw suspicion away from the man who had coveted Todd Kramer's star of office.

HATFIELD'S brain was still wrestling with the enigma when he drifted off to sleep at midnight, with the comforting lump of a Peacemaker .45 under his straw-stuffed pillow. . . .

The Lone Wolf awoke with a start, to see the pale promise of dawn making a pink rectangle of his bedroom window. He sat bolt unright, pawing in his levis pocket for his watch. It was ten minutes to four. The sun would rise in fifteen minutes at this season of the year in Texas.

Refreshed by his brief rest, Jim Hatfield doused his face with cold water from a cracked bowl on the dresser and hurriedly donned his boots and chaps.

In the ghostly half-light of approaching day, the dresser barricade in front of the doorway looked silly, made the Ranger grin with embarrassment. On the other hand, perhaps that precaution had stayed a killer's hand during the night.

He buckled on his gun-belts and settled the weight of his twin Colts at his flanks. Jacking open the .45s, Hatfield checked his cylinders and slipped an extra shell into the empty chamber he habitually carried under the firing pin.

Then he shoved the dresser back to its accustomed place and unlocked the door.

The hotel corridor was deserted as he headed downstairs into the lobby. A sleepy-eyed clerk was checking his list of tenants as Hatfield trailed his spurs toward the street door.

"Nary a soul slept in this place besides you, Mr. Hatfield," commented the hotel clerk. "The whole danged town spent the night hunkered down in the courthouse plaza, like they was waitin' for Fourth of July fireworks."

Hatfield adjusted the cleft in his gray Stetson.

"No fireworks durin' the night?" he yawned.

The clerk shook his head and grimaced as if in disappointment.

"Things was so quiet around the jail that Boojum Vozar went to sleep. Leastwise he quit answerin' when Sam Wanda would yell in every hour or so to see if he was still *bueno.*" The clerk wagged his head. "Vozar's got more nerve than I give him credit for. If it was me the Kiowa Killer told to get out of town, I'd be wadin' the Rio Grande about now."

Hatfield laughed and stepped out into the cold morning gloom. The Ritz Palace clerk had not exaggerated. It appeared that the entire population of Brasada, including the cowhands who had ridden in from surrounding ranches for an evening's gambling and drinking, had bivouacked in the vicinity of the county jail.

The Ranger passed rows of sleeping cowpunchers on the board sidewalks as he approached the jailhouse. Surrounding the brick calaboose were the members of Boojum Vozar's cordon of guards, backs to the wall, armed with rifles and shotguns.

The eastern horizon was aflame now with the red advent of dawn. In the ruddy glow, Hatfield paused in front of the jail and rolled a brownie cigarette. His star was in plain sight.

He knew several of the guards. Sam Wanda, his sallow face etched with harsh lines from his all-night vigil, squatted on the jail steps, a double-barreled buckshot gun across his lap.

Harry Rockman, the *Enterprise* editor, was posted under the window of the sheriff's office, a Winchester under his arm. Rockman scowled as he caught sight of Hatfield and recognized the stranger he had caught trespassing in his printshop the previous afternoon.

Ted Bonesteel and Jim Buffalo were standing at either corner of the jail front, their rifles keeping curious spectators at a goodly distance from the building. Other Brasada citizens were spaced at regular intervals around the sides and back of the building where Boojum Vozar had locked himself against the Kiowa Killer's ultimatum.

Then the copper-red sun thrust the rim of its disk above the flat Texas horizon to eastward, and the dawn of a new day brought the multitude to its feet, shouting.

"It's sun-up! Come on out o' there, Boojum!"

"Yuh out-squatted the killer, Booj! Rattle yore hocks down to the Lone Star an' set up the house like yuh said yuh would, cuss yore fat carcass!"

CHAPTER VIII

Challenge

AS THE sun lifted in fiery splendor over the sage flats, turning the sluggish waters of the Pecos to crimson, the cordon of guards relaxed their vigilance.

Sam Wanda, stretching his stiff muscles, shouldered his shotgun and walked around to the jail window.

"Just to play it safe, yuh better stay in there for another couple hours, Boojum!" shouted the gambler. "I'll have the Chinee bring yuh a tray of breakfast."

Wanda paused, cocking his head for Vozar's answer. But no sound came from the cell block.

"*Vozar!* Wake up, yuh blasted fool—the sun's riz!"

The crowd held its breath. No sound, not a whisper from the jail's interior.

His face suddenly grim, Sam Wanda pointed his shotgun at the weeds underfoot and pulled both triggers, discharging a rain of buckshot into the earth. The roar of the ten-gauger vollied in echo off Brasada's false fronts, a noise to wake the dead who slumbered under the tombstones on Boot Hill.

"Vozar! Boojum! Are yuh tryin' to scare us?"

The breath-held quiet which followed was broken by a call from the tall, black-haired stranger who had ridden into Brasada the day before on a golden sorrel.

"Somethin's wrong, Wanda! I'd advise yuh to break into that jail and find out why Vozar don't answer."

Sam Wanda bit out an oath as he whirled to face the man who had spoken. Then he froze, his eyes fixed to the Texas Ranger badge on Jim Hatfield's hickory shirt.

"A—a Ranger!" the saloonman gasped out. His words sent a surprised murmur through the crowd.

"Yes," Hatfield said. "I'm the Ranger that Sheriff Kramer sent for. From here on, Wanda, yuh can consider me in charge, savvy?"

Hatfield turned, seeing mingled expressions of alarm and respect on the faces of the cowtown mob. He singled out a buckskin-shirted muleskinner and barked an order:

"Rustle up a wagon tongue for me, *amigo*. We're breakin' into that jail *pronto prontico*. I'm worried about Vozar."

The freighter hurried off. In the space of seconds, the Lone Wolf had dominated the mob which now looked to him for leadership.

A few moments later a half-dozen men arrived at the jail, toting a telegraph pole they had found behind Ted Bonesteel's Overland Telegraph office across the courthouse plaza.

Ranger Jim Hatfield leaped forward to help them man the heavy battering ram, as the log was sent crashing against the door of the sheriff's office. Panels gave way with a splintering crash as the door caved inward. Sam Wanda was at Hatfield's elbow as the crowd surged into the sheriff's office, to be confronted by the locked door of the jail.

"Stand back, men!" rasped Hatfield. He turned to Harry Rockman, the newspaper editor. "Mr. Rockman, you've got a thirty-thirty there. Blast open the lock!"

The *Enterprise* editor, eyeing the Ranger with a new expression, took aim with his Winchester and fired a steel-jacketed .30-30 missile at the lock.

Metal shattered as the bullet ricocheted into the door casing. A moment later the Lone Wolf was kicking the door open and leading the rush of men into the jail.

Hatfield skidded to a halt in front of Vozar's cell, Rockman and Wanda at his side. Behind the trio, a battery of eyes were focused in stunned disbelief on what was inside the cell. Boojum Vozar lay stretched on the floor beside his cot, his eyes staring sightlessly at the jail ceiling.

Someone crowded past Jim Hatfield. It was Coroner Josh Fenton. Reaching an arm through the cell bars, Fenton touched Vozar's outflung arm. It was as cold and stiff as a chunk of wood as he searched for a pulse in the deputy's fat wrist.

Even as the coroner looked up, Hatfield knew the truth.

"The Kiowa Killer made good his threat, men," whispered Josh Fenton. "Boojum Vozar is dead!"

FENTON stood aside as Ranger Jim Hatfield stretched an arm through the steel bars of the cell door and rummaged inside the dead deputy's pockets, to produce Vozar's key ring. The cell was unlocked and Hatfield, accompanied by the coroner, stepped inside to examine the body.

There was a livid bruise on Vozar's left temple, but otherwise the deputy's corpse revealed no injury. No mark of bullet or club or knife was visible on the dead man. Yet it was obvious that Vozar had been dead for hours.

"It's—it's impossible!" cawed Sam Wanda, standing on the outside of the cell. "Nary a livin' soul could 'a' got inside this jail durin' the night. The Kiowa Killer must be a ghost!"

Josh Fenton stoked his pipe with coarse tobacco and sat on Vozar's cot, staring at the body.

"The cause of death," he said gruffly, "will have to be determined at a coroner's inquest. Personally, I'd say Vozar was plumbed scared to death. A heart attack because of terror. This head bruise is just where he fell on the floor."

Lighting up his pipe, Fenton stared at Jim Hatfield, his eyes focused on the strange rider's badge.

"You may be a Texas Ranger, feller," Fenton said bluntly, "but as coroner of Brasada County, I'm in charge of this corpse. Any objections?"

Hatfield shook his head, deciding to humor the man.

"Of course not. It's yore official duty to perform an autopsy on Vozar. I'm as curious as you are to find out whether the Kiowa Killer was responsible for Vozar's death last night—or whether he

suffered a heart attack."

Sam Wanda, standing in the crowd which jammed the jail room, grunted an oath.

"How do we know this stranger's a Ranger, Josh?" he demanded testily. "Anybody can pin a badge on his brisket."

Strangely enough, it was Harry Rockman who came to Hatfield's defense.

"He's a Ranger, all right," the *Enterprise* publisher said. "I thought his face was familiar when I caught him in my—when I seen Hatfield in town yesterday afternoon. I seen him testifyin' at a trial over in San Antonio a few years back. He's the Ranger they call the Lone Wolf."

Red Jack Skellet, squirming his way through the crowd which packed the jail room, groped his way unmolested into Vozar's cell in time to hear Rockman's words.

"If the Lone Wolf is workin' on this case," the blind man said, "Brasada is lucky. If there's ary a man in all Texas who can slap his brand on the Kiowa Killer, it's Jim Hatfield."

Sam Wanda continued to scowl hostilely at the Texas Ranger, but there were no other dissenting voices. Hatfield realized that the crisis was past. Brasada had accepted him and his authority and was grateful for his presence, now that the cowtown was without a lawman. Hatfield's brilliant reputation had spread to all corners of the Lone Star State and, in this instance at least, had served him in good stead.

"Clear out, all of yuh!" ordered Coroner Josh Fenton. "We got to get Boojum's remains over to my place."

Tears were dribbling down Red Jack Skellet's face as the blind man groped his fingers reverently over the dead body of his checker-playing friend. Inside of twenty-four hours, the blind saddlemaker had lost his two closest companions.

A stretcher was improvised from the wrecked door of the jail office and Jim Hatfield, assisted by the coroner and Sam Wanda, loaded Boojum Vozar's bulky corpse on the door and toted it down the main street to Fenton's undertaking parlors.

The sidewalks were lined with somber-faced crowds, men removing their hats as the mournful procession moved past. The roly-poly deputy had been a popular figure in Brasada.

IN THE privacy of Fenton's workshop, where the body of Sheriff Todd Kramer lay draped under a canvas shroud on a morgue slab, the coroner set about the job of removing Vozar's clothing in preparation for his official autopsy.

In the act of peeling off the dead lawman's shirt, Fenton cried out in sudden alarm. From a pocket of Vozar's shirt there had fallen an ominous square of yellow cardboard!

Jim Hatfield snatched the card off the floor, his pulses hammering. The Ranger turned the card over and stared aghast at the five lines of Condensed Gothic type printed there:

I WARNED BOOJUM VOZAR TO LEAVE TOWN BEFORE SUNRISE. HE CHOSE TO DEFY ME. THREE MORE TO GO—AND LOCKED JAILS MEAN NOTHING TO

THE KIOWA KILLER

Those twenty-seven words of impersonal type held an implication which made the Ranger doubt his sanity. Vozar had been killed, then! And the Kiowa Killer had had to get inside the closely-guarded jail in order to slip his card into Vozar's shirt pocket! The whole thing was impossible, fantastic—and yet it had happened!

The coroner, accustomed as he was to violent death in the course of his profession, was chalk-white as Hatfield finished reading.

"You'll notice," Hatfield went on, "that the printer's ink on this card is still fresh and sticky. It came off a printing press some time since midnight. Don't you agree, Rockman?"

Harry Rockman, accepting the killer's taunting message with a hand that shook as if from the ague, lifted frightened eyes to stare at the Texas Ranger. It was impossible for Hatfield to judge if there was guilt written on the printer's ashen face.

"I know what yuh're thinkin', but yuh're loco!" screamed the newspaper man, falling back a pace. "Yuh think I turned out that card because I'm the only printer in the county!"

For an instant, Hatfield believed that

Rockman had gone berserk, as the printer splayed fingers above the stock of his six-gun. Then Rockman's face relaxed.

"I got an alibi!" he panted hoarsely. "The whole town knows I was standin' guard at the jail all night, Hatfield. Yuh can't pin this onto me just because I'm a printer."

Hatfield shrugged. Rockman had an alibi. Yet someone had entered the *Enterprise* printshop during the night and set up the type on Vozar's card, Hatfield was certain.

"Fenton, you go on with the autopsy," Hatfield ordered. "This card makes it plain that Vozar didn't die of natural causes. Meanwhile I aim to fine-tooth-comb that jailhouse of yores. There must be *some* way the Kiowa killer slipped inside durin' the night without the guards' knowledge."

Leaving the undertaking parlors, the Ranger hurried down the main street toward the jail, conscious of the fact that hundreds of pairs of eyes followed him. The throng that had spent a vigil outside the Brasada County jail the night before had now massed in front of Fenton's office, awaiting the official report on Vozar's mysterious death.

CHAPTER IX

Coroner's Verdict

REACHING the corner of the courthouse plaza, Hatfield heard his name called. Glancing around, he recognized Susan Reid, standing on the courthouse steps. She was wearing a simple skirt and white blouse, in readiness for her customary duties in the courthouse office where she worked. Except that her eyes were red-rimmed with grief, the girl seemed in perfect control of her emotions.

"The town may think it callous of me to report for duty at the office when Gramp's funeral hasn't even taken place," Susan Reid said, when Hatfield walked over to halt before her. "But I have to do something—to keep my mind busy."

The Ranger studied the girl carefully.

"I've let the town know I'm a Ranger, Miss Reid," he said, as he saw the girl staring at his badge. "There's no further need for yuh to keep that fact a secret."

A troubled frown gathered between the girl's brows.

"But isn't that dangerous?" she asked anxiously. "I heard the news—about poor Boojum. If the Kiowa Killer is capable of committing an impossible killing like that—"

Hatfield's eyes narrowed.

"Killin'?" he cut in sharply. "What makes yuh think Vozar was killed, Miss Reid? The coroner thinks he died of a heart attack."

Susan flushed in confusion. Hatfield was pondering the fact that the girl could not posibly have heard of the Kiowa Killer's message found on Vozar's body.

"I—I naturally thought he was killed," she said lamely. "I knew Booj pretty well. He wasn't the type to commit suicide in that locked jail, no matter how scared he was."

Hatfield scowled thoughtfully, deciding not to tell the girl that the Kiowa Killer already knew his identity, as evidenced by the lamp-chimney message he had left in Hatfield's hotel room the night before. The fact which had decided the Ranger to pin his badge in plain sight.

"One thing, Miss Reid," he said gravely. "Are you dead shore yuh told no one—not even Ted Bonesteel—that I was a Ranger workin' undercover?"

Susan Reid's eyes widened in dismay.

"I swear it on my word of honor!" she insisted. "I never told a soul. But how about that prowler in the garden?"

Hatfield shrugged and turned away.

"I'll be sashayin' along now, ma'am." he said courteously. "Don't worry about anything."

The girl's eyes followed him, perplexed by his sudden aloofness, as Jim Hatfield crossed the plaza to the deserted jail.

Ten minutes later the Ranger emerged from the building, more puzzled than ever. A thorough search had convinced him that there were no secret trap-doors in the jail floor, through which the Kiowa Killer could have entered the calaboose. The foundations were set on bedrock, and he sounded the brick walls in search of posible hidden passageways without success. The corrugated iron roof of the county prison was devoid of so much as a chimney or ventilating shaft.

Returning to Fenton's undertaking parlors, Hatfield found the street throng in a state of excitement. The coroner had just posted his official verdict concerning the cause of Boojum Vozar's death on the bulletin board. It read:

Deputy Sheriff Vozar was poisoned. An autopsy has revealed the fact that Vozar's stomach contained arsenic, in sufficient quantity to remove all doubt as to the cause of his demise.

JOSHUA FENTON,
County Coroner

Jim Hatfield drew in a deep breath. The mystery was solved. Fenton's autopsy was proof that Boojum Vozar had been a doomed man even before he entered the jail in an attempt to forestall the Kiowa Killer's threat to slay him before sunrise.

THE coroner's jury was waiting inside the undertaker's office when Jim Hatfield entered. Fenton had presided over the inquest, and among the Brasada County citizens he had impaneled for the Vozar case were Harry Rockman, Sam Wanda, Red Jack Skellet, Jim Buffalo, Ted Bonesteel and seven other individuals whom the Ranger did not know.

"Well, Hatfield, there you have it," Josh Fenton remarked, as he waved the Ranger to a seat. "You read the jury's verdict. Doc Brunton here has corroborated our findin's. Vozar was poisoned."

Brunton, the Brasada medico, nodded solemnly.

"Vozar had enough arsenic in him to kill a dozen men," the medical man said emphatically.

Hatfield was silent for a moment, while he rolled and twisted a quirly and jabbed it between his lips.

"The question is," the Ranger said then, "how and when was the arsenic administered, Doctor?"

Brunton shrugged.

"The Kiowa Killer must have slipped the dose into the food Vozar ate at suppertime last night. It took several hours for the poison to act."

"Does anybody know where Vozar ate supper?" Hatfield inquired.

Ted Bonesteel squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"I—I might as well tell this," the Overland Telegraph man said reluctantly. "Susan invited Boojum and me over to the sheriff's house to eat last night. It's plain enough that a girl like Susie couldn't be guilty of such a thing."

Harry Rockman chuckled scornfully from across the room.

"Ever hear of Lucrezia Borgia?" asked the editor. "Some of the most vicious crimes in history were committed by women."

Bonesteel leaped to his feet, a red tide of wrath rising to match the hue of his tousled hair. Rockman recoiled as he saw the telegrapher snatch a Colt .45 from holster, but an instant later Jim Hatfield had pounced on Bonesteel from the rear and wrested the six-gun from the man's hand.

"Yuh'd better cool off, Bonesteel!" the Ranger said sharply. "Rockman wasn't accusin' yore friend of poisonin' Vozar. He was just guilty of a nasty insinuation."

White-mouthed and panting, Bonesteel sat down, glaring at the newspaper editor. Hatfield jacked open the telegrapher's Colt, ejected the cartridges, and returned the empty gun to its owner.

"This here meetin' is adjourned, men!" bellowed Josh Fenton. "We've found out the cause of Vozar's death. I reckon it's up to this Ranger to find out who poisoned him. When he finds the answer to that one, he'll know who the Kiowa Killer is."

Suddenly conscious of the fact that he was famished, Jim Hatfield made his way to a Chinese restaurant opposite Sam Wanda's saloon and ordered breakfast.

In the act of stirring his coffee, the Ranger remembered something. He was recalling the scene in the Lone Star barroom, when Sam Wanda had brought the frightened deputy sheriff a glass of whisky. It was entirely possible that Vozar had unknowingly sealed his doom when he had accepted that bracer from Sam Wanda's hand.

Leaving the restaurant with a hearty breakfast under his belt, Hatfield headed down the main street, intending to visit Susan Reid at the courthouse and learn from her the details of Vozar's last meal.

His attention was diverted en route by the interesting activity which was going on in front of the Big Seven Freight Syndicate's warehouses. Big Conestoga wagons, drawn by sturdy mules, were preparing to leave town on their way to El Paso to pick up a consignment of hay and

grain for the use of local livery stables.

One glimpse inside the well-stocked warehouses was enough to tell the Ranger that the Big Seven Snydicate was an enterprise of considerable importance in Brasada County. Thousands of dollars' worth of assorted merchandise, ranging from lumber to stock salt, was stored in the Big Seven's yards.

"Big Seven," Hatfield mused. "Funny name for a freight syndicate."

BY THE simple procedure of association of ideas, Hatfield's mind was drawn to the fact that the mysterious Kiowa Killer had marked seven men for death. Four victims had already fallen to the Killer.

The latest yellow card, found on the corpse of Boojum Vozar, had boasted ominously:

"THREE MORE TO GO."

Following a vague hunch, the Ranger strode along the row of freight wagons hitched for the El Paso trek and approached a burly foreman wearing a brushpopper jumper and bibless levis.

"Who's the ramrod here, amigo?" he asked.

The foreman eyed Hatfield through narrowed eyes which were threaded with tiny red veins as a result of having missed a night's sleep. Hatfield recalled that the Big Seven foreman had been one of Boojum Vozar's jail guards.

"If yuh mean the president o' the syndicate," grunted the foreman, "that was Rex Kohler. He was the Kiowa Killer's first victim. Since then, I been managin' the outfit. My monicker is Grote—Lefty Grote."

Hatfield glanced up at the big red "7" painted on the gable of the syndicate's main warehouse.

"How come the Big Seven brand?" he asked.

Grote rubbed a stubbled jaw.

"Are you pryin' into other people's business, Ranger," he asked truculently. "or is this official."

Hatfield grinned. "A little of both, I guess."

Grote paused to whittle a shaving of tobacco from a black plug he exhumed from his jumper. He tucked the quid under his cheek and squinted up at the signboard.

"This syndicate," he said, "controls the freight business in this part of Texas. We got ninety-odd wagons and over a thousand head of stock. Our lines run as far south at Del Rio and as far east as Amarillo. If yuh got anything yuh want shipped, the Big Seven can handle yore business at reasonable rates, Ranger."

Hatfield's grin widened. Grote had told him nothing so far. Yet the burly foreman did not seem unfriendly.

"A nice monopoly, seeing as how there are no railroads in this neck of the woods," Hatfield remarked. "Where did it get the name of Big Seven?"

Grote spat a gobbet of tobacco juice on a wheel hub.

"The Big Seven," Grote explained, "is the name picked out for the syndicate by the seven men who put up the *dinero* for the business at the start. Seven stockholders come across with four-five thousand pesos apiece. I reckon they tripled their investment the first year. Business is good, Ranger. Our muleskinners are are kept busy day and night."

The germ of an idea had taken root in the Lone Wolf's head and he pursued it doggedly, with the same spirit that seizes a prospector when a random vein begins to show color. He had an idea that he was on the verge of learning vitally important information from "Lefty" Grote.

"Any objection to tellin' me the names of the Big Seven stockholders?"

The two men withdrew to make room for the creaking advance of the big hooded mud wagons, loaded down with hides on their outgoing trip.

"Well, there's only three stockholders left, as a matter of fact," Grote said. "There's Jim Buffalo, the Injun breed who owns the Box B Ranch up the river a piece. Then there's Sam Wanda, the gambler who runs the Lone Star Saloon. Harry Rockman is one of the stockholders —he owns the newspaper here in town."

A pulse was throbbing on Hatfield's temple. He tried to make his voice sound casual as he put another question:

"What happened to the other four members of the Big Seven?"

Grote bent a quizzical stare at the Ranger. Then he pointed off to the southeast, to where the tombstones of the

Brasada cemetery glittered in the morning sun in a fenced-off enclosure bordering the Pecos River.

"They're dead, Ranger. Rex Kohler, who was the organizer of the syndicate in the first place. Mizzou Jaybeck, who ran the land office here in town, he put up money to buy in. Then there was Sheriff Todd Kramer and his deputy, Boojum Vozar. I reckon you know what happened to them. Yuh'll see funerals if yuh stick around town today."

CHAPTER X

Ambush on the Pecos

FOR the first time since Captain Bill McDowell had ordered him to Brasada, Jim Hatfield believed he saw a logical pattern behind the Kiowa Killer's seemingly unrelated murders. In each case, the Killer's victims had one thing in common. They were stockholders in the most profitable business concern in northwest Texas, the Big Seven Freight Syndicate!

"What happens to the shares of the stockholders who were—er—who are deceased, Grote?" Hatfield asked. "Who bought their interest in the Big Seven?"

Grote chuckled ruefully.

"When Kohler was found hangin' from a cottonwood a year ago," he said, "I had hopes of buyin' his share of stock. But the other members wouldn't sell. Each time a stockholder dies, his share in the business is divided up pro-ratty among the survivors. They got their corporation papers filed legal-like over in Austin. It's what yuh call a closed deal—nobody can buy in."

Hatfield reached out impulsively to grip Grote's ham-sized fist.

"Much obliged, Grote," he said. "I know a lot more'n I did ten minutes ago. Mebbe some day I'll explain why I was so danged nosy."

To his surprise, Lefty Grote winked. Looking around to make sure no workmen would overhear him, the Big Seven foreman leaned forward and whispered to the Ranger:

"It's as plain as the big nose on my face, Ranger. This Kiowa Killer must be one of the Big Seven stockholders, aimin' to kill off his pards and own the Syndicate hisself. I've knowed that all along, but I wouldn't be foolish enough to say what I thought in public."

Hatfield stared at the big freight boss for a moment. His ability to judge men rarely proved at fault, and the Ranger believed he had made a reliable ally in Lefty Grote. What was more, Grote's line of thinking paralleled Hatfield's own. From the first, he had been searching for some logical motive to explain the Kiowa Killer's chain of killings. Perhaps Grote's theory was nearer to the truth than he knew.

"On the other hand," Hatfield pointed out, "if all seven of the Big Seven stockholders are marked for death, it wouldn't leave anybody to own the syndicate. Ever stop to think of that, amigo?"

Grote rubbed his stubbled jaw in dismay.

"By jingoes, that puts the kibosh on my theory," he admitted sheepishly. "But there's still the chance that one of the dead men sold his stock secretly. In which case the Kiowa Killer could be a stockholder, and not one of the original Big Seven."

Hatfield grinned.

"Yuh took the words out o' my mouth, Grote," he said. "I reckon the syndicate has a secretary who keep records of their meetin's, don't it? Or has the secretary been killed?"

"Injun Jim Buffalo's the secretary, Ranger. That might strike yuh funny, him bein' a breed, but Jim was educated in a mission school where his mother was a teacher—and her a full-blooded Injun squaw, to boot. His daddy was a Yankee buffalo hunter. That's where Jim got his last name."

Jim Hatfield made up his mind. He would postpone his interview with Susan Reid over at the courthouse, in favor of riding out to the Box B Ranch and seeing if he could pry any of the Big Seven's secrets from "Injun Jim" Buffalo. The rancher had been more than cordial to Hatfield yesterday when the Ranger had enjoyed Buffalo's ranchhouse hospitality.

"Keep our little pow-wow under yore belt, Grote," the Lone Wolf said, turning to leave. "By the way—what Indian

tribe did Jim Buffalo's mother belong to, any idea?"

The Big Seven warehouse boss hesitated, licking his lips as if in indecision.

"Her tribe," Grote said finally, "was the Kiowa. . . ."

CALLING at the livery barn for his sorrel, Jim Hatfield left Brasada unobtrusively by way of Tres Cruces Street. He headed northward along the Pecos River Road by which he had arrived in the cowtown twenty-four hours before.

There had been two killings during that span of time, and the Kiowa Killer had given the Texas Ranger his warning. Perhaps, if the mystery outlaw was watching, he might believe that Jim Hatfield was taking advantage of that warning and getting out of Brasada while his hide was still unperforated.

Spurring Goldy into an easy, ground-covering trot, the Ranger put the cowtown behind the first Brasada-covered hogback and fixed his eye on the northern skyline. Injun Jim Buffalo's cattle ranch was an easy hour's ride up the Pecos. The ride would give the Ranger time in which to marshal his facts and plot his future plans.

All in all, the Lone Wolf had reason to be pleased with the progress he had made in his adventure-packed twenty-four hours in Brasada. While he was still as much in the dark as the rest of the cowtown regarding the Kiowa Killer's identity, Hatfield believed he was finally on the right trail.

In keeping with the habit which men cultivated on the lonely out-trails of the West, the Ranger frequently discussed what was on his mind out loud, for the benefit of his horse. Goldy pricked up his ears as Hatfield spoke to him now:

"A motive is all we need to crack this case, Goldy hoss. Only an insane fiend kills without reason, and the Kiowa Killer ain't loco. He plans his killin's too clever, and no lunatic would think of settin' up his death warnings with printer's type, to conceal his handwritin'. My hunch is that the Kiowa Killer is a man with a plumb clever brain, a criminal who's goin' to be mighty hard to trap."

The more he thought about it, the more convinced Hatfield was that the destiny of the Big Seven Freight Syndicate was tied up with the Kiowa Killer murders. If the Syndicate's secretary, Injun Jim Buffalo, granted the Ranger access to the secret minutes of the stockholders' meetings, the key to the riddle might well be in Hatfield's possession before the day was over.

"The way Grote has it, the Big Seven is a closed corporation," he muttered absently. "Once a member dies, his shares are distributed among the survivors. But if Jim Buffalo's records show that an outsider has bought into the Big Seven without the public's knowledge, that's a hoss of a different color."

Whether Injun Jim Buffalo would be willing to cooperate with Hatfield was a question only time could tell. One phase of the case which Hatfield had not had time to ponder on was why the mysterious outlaw had chosen the name "Kiowa Killer."

Was there any connection between that grim nickname and the fact that Injun Jim Buffalo had Kiowa blood in his veins?

Goldy jogged on, following the gray ribbon of wagon road across the alkali flats, following the general meandering course of the Pecos River. Three miles north of the old cattle crossing at Brasada, the rutted road turned at right angles through a cut in the clay bluffs which hemmed in the bitter waters of the Pecos.

Hatfield kept a tight rein on Goldy when the sorrel splashed across the river ford, knowing from past experience that the waters of the Pecos River were not good for a thirsty animal on a hot day.

In mid-river the water was brushing the tapaderos hanging from the stirrups of the Ranger's stock saddle. Then the gravel bar shallowed off and Goldy was following the Box B wagon road through a bosque of salt cedars on the east bank.

Pausing at the crest of the bank, the Ranger twisted in saddle to survey his back trail, a habit which was automatic to a Texas lawman. A faint smudge lay on the Brasada road behind him, a thin feather of alkali dust lifting into the brassy Texas sky. A wagon or a rider was coming up from the cowtown.

EVEN as he watched, Hatfield saw a black speck top the skyline a mile downstream and vanish into a draw leading to the river. The black speck was a horse and rider, crossing the river at some

little-used ford.

The Ranger's mouth drew into a taut line as he saw the distant rider emerge into the open and cross the Pecos, to vanish into the scrub willows on the east bank.

Was it possible that he had been followed out of Brasada? Was a horseman angling across the Texas prairies to intercept him before he reached the Box B Ranch?

Hatfield leaned forward to loosen his .30-30 Winchester in its scabbard under his right saddle fender. He was vitally aware of the fact that he lived under the shadow of bushwhack death. The Kiowa Killer had visited his bedroom in the Ritz Palace Hotel to warn him that peril rode at his side.

The Lone Wolf touched Goldy's flanks with steel and pushed on along the road, following it into a long *barranca* whose rim-rocks were furred with prickly pear and *ignota* weed. Injun Jim Buffalo's ranch was located at the far end of the *barranca*, still a couple of miles distant.

Hatfield rode with guns loosened in holsters, a keen eye vigilant on the skyline ahead and behind him. This long, brush-choked draw was made to order for ambuscade.

The cutbanks widened to give the Ranger a glimpse of Buffalo's ranch in the distance, westering sun rays winking off the slowly turning vanes of a windmill. Seized with a nervous urge to reach his journey's end as soon as possible, Hatfield spurred into a gallop.

Goldy's swift pace probably saved the Ranger's life in the next split instant.

Somewhere behind him, the desertlike stillness of the torrid afternoon was shattered by the blast of a rifle. Simultaneously, something like a hot iron grazed the egg of muscle on Hatfield's left shoulder.

Even as the clap of gunshot hit his eardrums, Jim Hatfield kicked cowboots from oxbow stirrups and pitched headlong to the ground, as if the bullet had struck him squarely in the back and knocked him from saddle. He landed heavily in a patch of gravel, rolled over and lay motionless on his stomach. Goldy galloped a dozen yards up the road before halting, trumpeting an alarm.

A heavy silence lay under the rim-rocks of the *barranca*. A warm gush of blood seeped down Hatfield's forearm, staining his shirt. The bullet burn stung like a fresh brand on his flesh, but the Ranger forced himself to lie motionless, controlling the rise and fall of his lungs with a supreme effort.

From where he lay in the road, Hatfield could see the smudge of gunsmoke which marked the location of the ambushed rifleman. The shot had been fired from a thicket of *tepula* scrub on the south rim of the draw, some fifty yards behind him.

CHAPTER XI

Tracks of the Kiowa Killer

NOTHING moved beind the *tepulas*. The rim of the *barranca* shimmered under the punishing heat waves. A horsefly landed on Hatfield's cheek, but he endured the insect without so much as a twitch of muscle.

In landing, Hatfield had apparently fallen loose-limbed, like a dead man. But his arms were at his sides, hands close to the curved stocks of his holstered six-guns.

Sunlight glinted on the blue steel barrel of a Winchester carbine, poking out of the *tepula* foliage. Hatfield held his breath, waiting to see if the hidden ambusher was planning to draw a bead on his prostrate victim and make sure of his drygulch job with a second shot.

After an eternity of waiting, Hatfield's suspense was relieved by seeing the rifle barrel withdrawn. Apparently the ambusher was satisfied that his first slug had struck the mounted Ranger in the back.

Hatfield's fingers coiled about the stock of his right-hand gun, out of view of the drygulcher on the rimrock, as he caught sight of the silhouetted killer moving out from behind the *tepulas*.

The Ranger groaned inwardly. The hot disk of the sun was poised above the ambusher's thicket, blinding him. Although the would-be killer was within easy six-gun range, Hatfield could not identify the figure. He saw only a silhouette, skylined against the blazing sun, like a figure cut

out of black paper.

The ambusher moved to the edge of the draw and jumped down onto the slope of talus which led to the pit of the *barranca*. The outlaw was coming down to the wagon road to inspect his victim's supposed corpse.

The slope was steep, forcing the silhouetted rifle-toter to pick his way carefully through a jungle of bull-tongue cactus and spiny tornillo. Hatfield slid his finger through the trigger guard of his Colt, easing the big Peacemaker a half-inch out of holster. When the drygulcher reached the midway point down the slope, Hatfield intended to bounce to his feet and get a six-gun drop on the oncoming bushwhacker.

Caught off-balance on the declivity, the man would be forced to discard his rifle and raise his arms in surrender, or else be a sure target for a .45 slug in the brisket before he could slap gunstock to cheek. At this range, Hatfield knew he couldn't afford to miss. This showdown would be a one-shot affair, with certain death the pay-off for the man with the steadiest gun hand.

Five steps more, and Hatfield would spring into action. He braced his muscles for the leap. And then a perverse destiny intervened. Inches from the prostrate Ranger's head, a sharp *zzzzzzz* sounded, the lethal warning of a diamondback rattlesnake!

Peering around through a screen of tousled hair, Jim Hatfield's face blanched as he caught sight of the coiled reptile, not twelve inches from his face. The rattler had been sunning himself on the rocks where the Ranger had dropped from horseback, and had coiled itself into striking position without Hatfield's being aware of the snake's presence.

The faint musky odor of the reptile reached Hatfield's nostrils. A surge of nausea filled him. Shooting a glance past the coiled rattler, the Lone Wolf saw the stalking ambusher working his way along a horizontal ledge.

The rattlesnake's venomous fangs glinted in the sun as it drew back its flat, diamond-shaped head with its pitted indentations. Beady eyes were fixed on Hatfield's face as the snake, its tail-tip blurring as it ratled its warning, drew back its head to strike.

Even as Hatfield stared, the rattlesnake launched its strike with blurring speed, venom-laden fangs aimed straight for the Texan's temple.

WITH a gasp of horror, Jim Hatfield rolled his head sideward, felt the ratlesnake's scaly body brush his forehead as the reptile's fangs darted into empty air. Lunging to his knees, Hatfield instinctively jerked six-gun from holster and tripped gunhammer, his point-blank slug ripping off the rattler's head before it could recoil.

Up on the talus slope, the ambusher stood poised, a silhouette against the blazing skyline as he stared in momentary bewilderment at the unexpected resurrection of the "dead man" on the road below. Even as Hatfield raised his gun, the drygulcher turned and scrambled up over the rim of the *barranca*.

Rock-dust sprayed the escaping killer's side as the Ranger's hastily-aimed slug thudded into the bank.

Hatfield was on his feet then, racing forward, a gun in either hand. The ambusher, heedless of the Ranger's shouts to halt, burrowed into the *tepulas* and vanished in the white-hot glare of the sun. In so doing he lost his grip on the Winchester, the carbine clattering down the talus slope and lodging in a thicket of pear.

At a dead run, Hatfield veered to the right and dived into the shelter of a boulder. He could not risk pursuit in the open, against the almost dead certainy of meeting a six-gun bullet from the *tepula* thicket.

"It's the Kiowa Killer," Hatfield panted through locked teeth. "It couldn't be anybody else—"

It was intolerable, being held at bay behind the sheltering boulder at the foot of the cutbank, but Hatfield knew the Kiowa Killer would be carrying short guns. With the sun in his eyes, Hatfield was helpless to buck a man hidden on the rimrock above him. There was no guarantee that the Kiowa Killer was not even now bellying along the *barranca* rim, keeping out of sight while he maneuvered his way to a point where he could spot the crouching Ranger and gun him down at close range.

Then Hatfield's ears caught the sharp

rataplan of hoofbeats as a galloping horse sped away from the *barranca,* heading toward the Pecos.

Hatfield tensed, suspecting treachery. The Kiowa Killer might have turned his horse loose and stampeded it, hoping to draw his victim out of hiding.

After the hoofbeats had died in the sweltering air, Jim Hatfield decided to make a gamble. Leaping out from behind the boulder, he raced up the talus slope until an overhang of the cutbank shielded him from the spot where the Kiowa Killer had crouched in the *tepulas.*

No shot rang out. No sound of a moving form behind the rimrock's foliage.

Pushing on, Jim Hatfield scrambled up the slope and peered over the rimrock. He was in time to see the dwindling figure of a horse and rider speeding along the sage flats toward Brasada, making for the Pecos. The Kiowa Killer—if such was the identity of the man who had stalked him from the cowtown—was already a quarter of a mile away.

"Whew—that was a close one!" Hatfield grunted, swabbing perspiration from his face with a bandanna. "I don't suppose I'll ever know for sure if that was the Kiowa Killer."

A moment later, however, Hatfield discovered dramatic proof to the contrary. Walking over to the *tepula* thicket where the ambusher had sighted his rifle toward the road below, the Ranger caught sight of a square of yellow cardboard resting in a sprig of Osage orange. Picking up the card, Hatfield read:

THE FAMOUS LONE WOLF RANGER DIDN'T GET OUT OF TOWN FAST ENOUGH—SO HE DREW THIS BOOT HILL TICKET FROM THE KIOWA KILLER

"This is one printin' job you wasted, son!" grunted the Texas Ranger with very wry humor, tucking the grisly souvenir in a pocket of his hickory shirt. "Yuh was aiming to crawl down to the road and leave this card on my dead carcass, eh?"

A CLOSE inspection of the ground around the *tepula* motte yielded the Ranger no further clues to the Kiowa Killer's identity. The flinty soil held no footprints, nor was Hatfield able to find anything more than a few bruised grass roots at the spot where the Kiowa Killer had hidden his horse in a bosque of stunted cypress.

Then, scanning the horizon once more, Hatfield was startled to see a telltale smudge of dust moving along a *barranca* to the south. The fugitive killer, instead of recrossing the Pecos, appeared to have headed for Jim Buffalo's ranch.

"Must aim to have another try at me," Hatfield grunted.

Lowering himself over the rim, he scrambled down the loose rocks to where the Kiowa Killer's carbine lay against the pear thicket. He picked up the weapon and examined it carefully. A fired shell was in the breech—a cartridge which, but for a break of luck, would have had the Ranger's name on it.

The .30-30 had but one distinguishing feature—the numeral "7", branded near the butt plate with a hot iron. Other than that identifying mark, the Winchester was a model common to the West, one which probably had a dozen counterparts in the town of Brasada alone.

"I couldn't expect the Kiowa Killer to have his name engraved on his carbine," grunted the Ranger, shouldering the Winchester and skidding his way down to the floor of the draw. "But there may be somebody in Brasada who will recognize this thirty-thirty."

Goldy trotted up and nuzzled Hatfield's shoulder, reminding the Ranger for the first time that he carried a bullet wound in his flesh. Peeling off his shirt, the Ranger saw that the grazing path of the .30-30 missile had already ceased bleeding. He decided against returning to Brasada to get Doc Brunton to bandage the wound. He bore the scars of cactus scratches more severe than this mark of the Kiowa Killer's slug.

Lashing the Killer's 7-branded Winchester behind the cantle next to his slicker roll, Jim Hatfield tightened his saddle girth and mounted.

Goldy snorted in alarm as he curveted past the bloody remains of the decapitated rattlesnake. Hatfield leaned from stirrups to recover his Stetson from a juniper bush, and eyed the dead snake thoughtfully. There was no accounting for the fickle ways of destiny. Without the intervention of that reptile, Hatfield would have had the Kiowa Killer in his custody

now. Instead, he was still faced with the enigma Cap McDowell expected him to solve.

His memory of the silhouetted Killer on the rimrock was practically valueless. Aside from the fact that the ambusher had worn a broad-brimmed Stetson and was of average height, Hatfield might as well not have glimpsed his would-be assassin at all.

Spurring on down the *barranca*, Hatfield left the confining walls of the draw to ride out on the open range, dotted with grazing cattle bearing Injun Jim Buffalo's Box B brand and earmarks. He saw no sign of the vanished Killer to the south.

Dogs set up a clamor as the Ranger rode up to the ranch. Skirting the corrals and barns, he drew rein in front of a blacksmith shop where a group of Box B punchers were busy shoeing their cavvy of peg ponies in preparation for the coming beef gather.

CHAPTER XII

Injun Jim

GRINS friendly and hearty greeted the Ranger as he dismounted. The Box B rannies—a mixture of Mexicans, Texans and halfbreed Indians—had shared their noon meal with Hatfield the day before and had formed a liking for the genial young rider.

"Howdy, Mr. Hatfield!" called a barrel-chested waddy who was hammering a horseshoe at an anvil inside the shop. "Why in thunder didn't yuh tell us yuh was a Ranger when yuh dropped in for a snack of bait with us yesterday?"

The Lone Wolf grinned, aware of the fact that the Box B riders were staring at the blood-stained sleeve of his shirt.

"Sometimes it don't pay to advertise the fact yuh're a star-toter, *companero!*" The Ranger laughed, pointing to his bullet-nicked shoulder. "On my way over here this afternoon somebody took a pot-shot at me. Lots of hombres consider a Ranger on the hoof as fair game, any season of the year."

The Box B cowhands crowded about Hatfield, glancing at each other soberly.

"Yuh better rattle yore hocks plumb out of this country, Hatfield!" advised the blacksmith soberly. "I got a hunch it was the Kiowa Killer who pinked yuh."

Hatfield turned to Goldy and untied the Winchester carbine from behind the cantle.

"By the way," he said evasively, "I found a rifle lyin' in the *barranca* between here and the Pecos. Any of you waddies ever seen this Winchester before?"

A burly wrangler snatched the carbine from Hatfield's grasp and studied it closely.

"Why, this belongs to the boss!" he exclaimed. "Injun Jim must have lost it out of his saddle boot ridin' back from town this mornin', Hatfield."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed, but the curving brim of his John B masked them from the Box B cowboys as he restored the carbine to its place on his saddle.

"I'm honin' to talk to yore boss, men," the Ranger said, hitching the cartridge belts on his hips. "I'll return his Winchester to him now, if he's anywheres around."

A freckle-faced ranny pointed off toward Buffalo's adobe-walled ranchhouse.

"The boss just got back a little while ago," he said. "Most likely he's gone to bed, seein' as how he was up all night helpin' guard Boojum Vozar's jail."

Hatfield picked up Goldy's reins, his friendly grin betraying no sign of the excitement which gripped him.

"*Muchas gracias*, boys. I'll take a pasear over to the house and roust Injun Jim out of bed."

Goldy trailed along behind the Ranger as Hatfield strode up a flower-bordered path to Injun Jim's whitewashed, tile-roofed home. An attractive quarter-breed child scampered across the porch at his approach, and Hatfield caught a glimpse of the rancher's American wife in a kitchen doorway. It was Hatfield's first knowledge that Jim Buffalo was a family man.

"*Buneos dias*, Senor Ranger!" a drowsy voice greeted Hatfield from the ranchhouse porch, as the lawman paused to hitch Goldy to a tie-rail outside the patio. "Come and sit down."

Pausing in the act of removing Buffalo's Winchester .30-30 from his saddle, Hatfield caught sight of Buffalo sitting in a

canvas hammock slung between two beams of the porch. The Box B owner's face was deep-lined with fatigue and his bullhide chaps were encrusted with fresh foam and horsehair, proof that he had just returned from a hard ride.

"Howdy, Mr. Buffalo!" the Ranger called back. "Yuh didn't lose yore saddle gun this mornin', did yuh?"

Injun Jim Buffalo stared curiously at the carbine which Hatfield brought to him. The Ranger, watching closely for some telltale stiffening of the breed's facial muscles, saw only the impassive blank expression which Buffalo had inherited from his Kiowa mother.

WAS it possible that Buffalo had been the ambusher who had followed him out from town? If so, then the Box B rancher had circled back from the Pecos to beat Hatfield to the ranch, within the past half hour.

"It is my rifle, *si*," Buffalo acknowledged frankly enough, tapping the numeral "7" on the walnut stock. "I left it at the Big Seven office in Brasada many moons back. This is the type of rifle we issue our muleskinners whenever they carry a valuable freight shipment, senor. The syndicate owns ten-twenty of these carbines. Where did you get it?"

Thoughts raced inside the Lone Wolf's head. If Buffalo was telling the truth, then any one of dozens of men could have come into possession of this ambush weapon.

"I found it along the roadside after I crossed the Pecos this afternoon, Mr. Buffalo," the Ranger answered. "Somebody must have dropped it there, and recently. It ain't rusted."

Injun Jim Buffalo exposed even white teeth in a friendly grin as he waved Hatfield into a calfhide porch chair.

"What can I do for you, senor?" he asked courteously. "You wish to discuss Boojum Vozar's tragic death, *quizas?*"

The Lone Wolf hesitated. The casual way Buffalo had dismissed the Big Seven branded carbine, without attempting to deny his ownership of the Kiowa Killer's ambush weapon, had put Hatfield momentarily on the defensive.

"As secretary for the Big Seven Syndicate, yuh keep the minutes of the stockholders' meetin's," the Ranger said gravely. "I rode out here to ask yore permission to study yore books, Mr. Buffalo. I think they may have a bearin' on the Kiowa Killer's activities."

Injun Jim Buffalo's muscle-slabbed shoulders moved slightly inside his fringed buckskin shirt. The Box B cowman leaned back in his hammock, hands laced behind his head, his obsidian-black eyes surveying the Ranger quizzically.

"Our records are secret, Senor Ranger," Buffalo countered. "What exactly did you wish to know?"

Hatfield thought fast. Was this passive-faced Kiowa breed sparring with him in a battle of wits?

"I want to know," the Lone Wolf said abruptly, "what became of the Syndicate stock which belonged to Rex Kohler and the other members of the Big Seven that were killed.'

For a long minute, Injun Jim Buffalo lay as motionless in the sagging hammock as if he were carved from wood.

"The stock belonging to Rex Kohler and Mizzou Jaybeck," the breed answered after long thought, "was supposed to be divided equally among the surviving stockholders. Instead, we voted to sell it to outsiders. But that is information which the syndicate wishes kept strictly secret, for business reasons. The Big Seven is a million-dollar business. We do not welcome outside capital, Senor Hatfield."

The Ranger's heart hammered his ribs. He had a feeling that he was on the verge of discovering the key to the entire Kiowa Killer case, if Buffalo would answer his next question.

"You know that I am a Ranger, and yuh've probably guessed I'm workin' on the Kiowa Killer business," Hatfield said frankly. "I feel that the lives of innocent people depend on the speedy solution of this mystery, Mr. Buffalo. Yuh can swear me to secrecy if yuh want to, but it's vitally important that yuh tell me who bought Kohler's and Jaybeck's shares of the Big Seven."

Injun Jim Buffalo tensed, reminding Hatfield of a predatory animal in a trap. But the suspicious lights ebbed in the breed's inky orbs, and he surprised Hatfield with a ready answer.

"Because you are a Ranger, I will disclose the Syndicate's secrets, senor. As a matter of fact, *three* persons bought into

the syndicate. The stockholders took pity on Red Jack Skellet, who was blinded while working as one of our drovers, and cut him in. Josh Fenton, the coroner, brought pressure to bear on Harry Rockman, who edits the newspaper Fenton owns, so he also became a shareholder in the Big Seven.

"Also at the request of Sheriff Todd Kramer, we allowed him to buy the remaining shares in the name of his granddaughter, Senorita Susan Reid. Each of these three invested ten thousand dollars cash in our business. Does that answer your question, Senor Hatfield?"

* * * * *

BRASADA'S places of business, including the busy yards of the Big Seven freight syndicate which dominated the town and gave it its reason for being, locked up for the afternoon so their owners could attend the double funeral at the Brasada cemetery. There, with a hawk-faced circuit-riding Baptist sky-pilot officiating, the remains of Sheriff Todd Kramer and his ill-fated deputy, Boojum Vozar, were consigned to their eternal resting places under the Texas sod.

Susan Reid, accompanied by her fiance, Ted Bonesteel, walked back from the cemetery arm in arm with him, to find that Sam Wanda had been busy posting signs on every wall and fence post in town. The signs, printed on Harry Rockman's press, offered a standing reward of five thousand dollars for the capture and conviction of the Kiowa Killer.

"Wanda shouldn't have done that," Susan commented. "He'll draw the killer's vengeance before the week is out, Ted."

The Overland Telegraph man shrugged. Staring down into the tear-reddened eyes of his future bride, Bonesteel voiced for the first time the suspicions which he had formulated.

"It wouldn't surprise me if these bounty posters aren't intended to pull the wool over Jim Hatfield's eyes, darling."

The girl clutched Bonesteel's arm, her face paling.

"You mean, you believe Sam Wanda is the Kiowa Killer?"

Bonesteel nodded grimly.

"Wanda stood to profit in two ways by the deaths of yore grandfather and Boo] Vozar," he reminded the girl. "Both of 'em owned shares of Big Seven stock, which will be divided up among the rest of yuh, including Sam Wanda. And as they were the only two lawmen in town, Wanda should be glad they're dead. You know the sheriff intended to padlock the Lone Star and run Wanda out of town, if another shootin' scrape happened in Wanda's saloon."

As the young couple proceeded down the main street, heading for Susan's home, they encountered Sam Wanda in front of the Lone Star. The frock-coated saloonkeeper was in the act of mounting his palomino gelding, which was trapped out in the fine silver-mounted saddle which Red Jack Skellet had custom-built for the gambler.

"Leavin' town, Wanda?" Bonesteel asked caustically.

Swinging into stirrups, Wanda tipped his black Stetson to the girl.

"Headin' over to El Paso for a few days, Ted," Wanda admitted. "We're runnin' short of stock at the Lone Star and I aim to place some orders for red-eye with the jobbers over in 'Paso."

A burst of sarcastic laughter came from under the wooden awning of the saloon, and Wanda turned to see Harry Rockman leering at him from a bench.

"Yuh mean yuh've repented havin' me print that batch of reward posters for yuh this mornin', Sam!" jeered the newspaper editor, his thick voice betraying his tipsy condition. "I wouldn't come back to Brasada until the Kiowa Killer's scalp has been nailed up to dry, Sam."

Wanda's pallid face went brick-red. The gambler controlled his rush of anger with an effort.

"I'll be back," he said coolly, "as soon as I've transacted my business in El Paso, Rockman. Meanwhile, I'd advise yuh to close-hobble that lip of yores."

CHAPTER XIII

Blind Man's Hunch

UNSTEADILY, Rockman got to his feet and lurched across the sidewalk

to stand alongside Susan and Bonesteel, his bleary eyes focusing with difficulty on the mounted gambler on the opposite side of the hitch-rack.

"Meanin' what, Sam?" demanded the cow country editor truculently. "What have I got to be close-lipped about?"

Wanda picked up his reins, a queer grin playing over his lips as he stared down at the angry printer.

"The whole town's wonderin'" Wanda said quietly, "how come my reward posters are printed in the same style of type that the Kiowa Killer uses on them yellow signs of his, Rockman. They're wonderin' if yuh do the Kiowa Killer's job printin'."

With an obscene oath, Harry Rockman dug for the Dragoon revolver holstered under the lapel of his jumper.

Before Rockman got his gun in the open, Sam Wanda had flipped a .41 derringer from its spring clip under his right cuff, the deadly hideout gun leveled squarely at Rockman's chest.

Susan Reid cried out as she saw Ted Bonesteel pounce on Rockman and fell the half-drunken editor with a haymaker to the jaw. Rockman's .45 clattered into the mud as the editor lay groaning on the sidewalk, blood seeping from his bruised chin.

"Thanks, Ted," Sam Wanda commented icily. He flicked the derringer out of sight under his sleeve with a deft twist of his white hand. "Yuh saved me the job of punchin' Rockman's ticket."

Without further comment, Sam Wanda wheeled his palomino about and spurred off down the street to westward, heading along the Wells Fargo route across the Guadalupe Mountains to El Paso.

A small crowd of chap-clad cowpunchers had witnessed the near shootout in front of Wanda's saloon, and clustered around as Ted Bonesteel lifted Rockman to his feet. From the undertaking parlors across the street, Coroner Joshua Fenton strode over to where Rockman leaned against the hitching post, rubbing his sore jaw.

"I seen yuh draw steel ag'in Wanda, yuh loco fool!" snarled the undertaker, grabbing Rockman's arm. "Yuh ought to know better than buck a gunslick like Sam. Yuh better light a shuck over to yore office and sleep off yore drunk, Harry, or I'll have to locate another editor to run the *Enterprise*."

Rockman shook off the coroner's grip on his sleeve and turned to snarl an oath at Ted Bonesteel.

"Why should yuh cuss Ted?" demanded Fenton angrily. "If he hadn't bashed yuh when he did, yuh'd be in the obituary column of next week's *Enterprise*, yuh cussed sot!"

The crowd broke up as Bonesteel escorted Susan Reid toward her home on the outskirts of town and Harry Rockman stumbled over to his newspaper office.

Red Jack Skellet was seated on the bench outside Fenton's undertaking parlors when the coroner returned to his place. The blind saddle-maker turned his black spectacles toward Fenton as the coroner sat down beside him.

"What was the ruckus acrost the street, Josh?" Skellet asked curiously.

Fenton recounted the brief clash between Rockman and Sam Wanda for the blind man's benefit.

"This reign of terror has got to stop, Red Jack," Fenton concluded, "before we're all stark crazy. I got a hunch the reason Sam left town was because he'd got a warnin' from the Kiowa Killer to vamose."

Red Jack Skellet piled gnarled hands over his cane and shook his head moodily.

"Our one hope," the blind man commented, "is in that Ranger, Jim Hatfield. Sooner or later, I got a hunch the Kiowa Killer will make a wrong move and Hatfield will dab his twine on him."

Fenton grunted skeptically.

"If the Killer don't put a bullet through the Ranger first," he said. "I wouldn't be in Hatfield's shoes for all the *dinero* in Texas."

A DRUMROLL of hoofbeats echoed between Brasada's false fronts, and Fenton twisted his head to stare up the street toward the Pecos River. He was in time to see Jim Hatfield rein his golden sorrel into the livery barn beyond the Ritz Palace Hotel.

"Speakin' of the devil," the coroner grunted, "that was the Ranger's hoss yuh just heard, Red Jack. I hear he dodged the funeral and rode over to have a powwow with Injun Jim Buffalo this afternoon."

Skellet fumbled in his pocket for a

cigar. Fenton struck a match and lighted the smoke for his blind friend.

"If I had my eyesight," Skellet remarked, "I think I'd check on Jim Buffalo myself. Him bein' the only Kiowa in these parts, I've often wondered if there was any connection between him and the name the Kiowa Killer masquerades under. . . ."

Turning Goldy over to the hostler, the Lone Wolf went back to his hotel room to wash up and rest a while before supper. From the hotel clerk he received the news that Sam Wanda had left town within the past hour, ostensibly on a business trip to El Paso.

Darkness had fallen over the cowtown before Hatfield emerged from the hotel and trailed his spurs over to the Chinese restaurant next door to Wanda's saloon. He ate a hearty supper, but his mind was not on his food. His near-brush with death on the road to Injun Jim Buffalo's ranch that afternoon had served as a grim warning to Hatfield that he was intended to be the Killer's next victim. And the information which Buffalo had given him in confidence, regarding the new stockholders of the Big Seven Freight Syndicate, had only served to deepen the mystery rather than shed any light on it.

If his theory was correct that the Kiowa Killer was a member of the Big Seven, out to wrest control of the million-dollar business, then Buffalo's information had only succeeded in giving him three more suspects.

It was like fighting with a blindfold on, against an adversary who might strike any moment without warning.

Boojum Vozar had eaten his last meal on earth at Susan Reid's table. The coroner's report was that Vozar had been poisoned. And Susan Reid was a secret stockholder of the Big Seven, with only her sex tending to rule her out as a possible Kiowa Killer suspect. Had Vozar been poisoned at Susan's home?

"On the other hand, there's no proof that the coroner wasn't lying about that arsenic he found in Vozar's stomach," Hatfield was forced to admit to himself. "Fenton has ten thousand dollars invested in the Big Seven. So has Red Jack Skellet. It's enough to drive a man loco."

His supper finished, the Ranger walked out of the restaurant and saw that the Lone Star Saloon was open for business, despite the absence of its owner, Sam Wanda.

Going into the barroom, Hatfield accepted an invitation from Josh Fenton to join a game of poker. Before many hands had been played, Hatfield had learned the details of the altercation between Sam Wanda and Harry Rockman that afternoon, a quarrel which might well have ended in Rockman's death had it not been for Ted Bonesteel's intervention.

Injun Jim Buffalo and a dozen of his Box B cowhands entered the saloon and ordered drinks at the bar. His black eyes sweeping the barroom, Buffalo nodded courteously when he caught the Ranger's eye.

Hatfield was dealing a round of stud when the batwings slammed open and Red Jack Skellet groped his way into the saloon, waving his cane frantically as he approached the bar. The blind man's mouth was twisted in a grimace of extreme fear, reminding Hatfield of the way Boojum Vozar had entered that same doorway the previous night.

"Is that Texas Ranger anywheres around? bellowed the saddlemaker, when his cane rapped against the brass rail.

Hatfield dropped his cards and stood up, ignoring the stack of gold coins at the baize in front of his chair.

"Here I am, Skellet!" called the Ranger. "What's wrong?"

HATFIELD reached out to grab the blind man's shoulder as Skellet groped his way in the direction of the Ranger's voice. Skellet's skinny chest was heaving under his rapid breathing.

"I think something's wrong over at the *Enterprise* office, Hatfield!" gasped the blind man. "Mebbe it's a bum hunch, but I think Harry Rockman's in trouble!"

Poker players slid back their chairs to crowd around Skellet and the Ranger. Fenton was at Hatfield's elbow, with Injun Jim crowding close behind him.

"What's the deal, *amigo?*" Hatfield snapped anxiously.

"Well, it's like this," the blind man said hoarsely. "I was upstairs in my shop over the *Enterprise* office, soapin' down a saddle I'm turnin' out for one of Jim Buffalo's rannihans. I thought I heard a noise like a gunshot downstairs, but I didn't pay no attention because Harry Rockman's got

hisself a pistol range where he practises. That was about an hour ago."

"Yes—go on!" prompted the Ranger, as Skellet paused to recover his breath.

"Well, Harry and I got a habit of drinkin' a nightcap together on nights we both work late," Skellet continued. "I went downstairs and found the door of the printshop locked. I stuck my head through a window where a pane is missin' and hollered, and all the answer I got was a kind of groanin' sound. I figger Harry's in trouble!"

The saloon crowd trooped at the Ranger's heels as Hatfield raced out into the night, gripping Red Jack Skellet's hand. Reaching the door of the *Enterprise* office, the Lone Wolf twisted the knob and found it locked.

A ceiling lamp was burning inside the printshop, illuminating the untidy alley of type cases. Even as Hatfield put his face to the grimy window pane, he caught sight of Rockman.

The *Enterprise* editor lay sprawled on his face at the foot of a font cabinet. Lamplight revealed a spreading pool of blood between Harry Rockman's shoulder blades.

The street crowd drew back to give Hatfield room as the Ranger drew a Colt .45 and triggered a slug at the door lock. A moment later Hatfield was kicking the door open and striding into the shadowy printshop, twin guns jutting from his fists.

Josh Fenton, a gun in his bony hand, stalked behind the Ranger as Hatfield crossed around the end of a paper-piled counter and knelt beside Rockman. A bullet-hole was drilled into the editor's back where his suspenders crossed, the fabric of Rockman's shirt charred with gunpowder burns.

Holstering his guns, Hatfield helped Josh Fenton roll the newspaperman's inert form over on its side. The coroner thumbed back Rockman's left eyelid, then shook his head.

"He's dead. The body's still warm. Reckon he bled to death inside the last five minutes, Hatfield."

Hatfield got to his feet, staring around at the battery of white faces assembled around the type cases.

The glare of lampshine revealed a trail of smeared bloodstains across the printshop floor, coming from the direction of Rockman's printing press.

"He was shot back there a ways," Hatfield pointed out, "and was either dragged or managed to pull hisself this far before he died. Must have been tryin' to reach the street door to get help, but didn't live to make it."

Red Jack Skellet, leaning against the paper-cutter for support, licked his lips nervously.

"He was alive five minutes ago," panted the blind man. "I heard him groan!"

CHAPTER XIV

Riddle in Type

JIM HATFIELD, stepping over Rockman's corpse, followed the trail of blood down the alley of type cases, halting when he came to the rickety flat-bed press. Steam was hissing in the boiler of Rockman's engine alongside the press, and a pile of newsprint, blank on the top side and printed on the other, revealed where Rockman had been in the act of running off tomorrow's edition of the *Weekly Enterprise* when death had struck from behind.

"Look!" exclaimed Injun Buffalo, pointing toward the press. "A yellow card!"

Hatfield spotted the sinister square of cardboard at the same instant as the Box B rancher. He reached out to grab the placard. Printed in Condensed Gothic type was a brief, all-too-familiar message:

ROCKMAN WAS WARNED TO LEAVE
TOWN BUT WOULDN'T GO.
THE KIOWA KILLER

Josh Fenton dragged a cuff across his chalk-white face as Hatfield handed him the Kiowa Killer's card.

"It—it's true," the coroner said huskily. "Rockman and I both got a warnin' from the Kiowa Killer to leave town. Day before yesterday."

A stunned hush gripped the death scene as Hatfield walked back to where Harry Rockman's body lay. Kneeling down, he saw blood stains on an open drawer of type in the font cabinet beside Rockman's corpse. The editor, then, had man-

aged to drag himself to the type case and pull open a drawer before loss of blood had finished him.

Both of the dead man's hands were gripped tight shut. Prying open Rockman's right hand, Hatfield made a strange discovery. Clutched between the editor's fingers were three bits of type, matching the Boldface Gothic type from the opened drawer.

Spectators stared curiously as the Ranger inspected the three pieces of type.

One was an ampersand symbol, "&". Another was a capital "A". The third piece of type was a capital "W".

"Find somethin', Hatfield?" inquired Fenton, squatting beside the Ranger.

"This would indicate that Rockman was tryin' to get some type when he died," grunted the Lone Wolf. "Mebbe he'd found an error in the paper he was printin' and had stopped the press to make a correction."

Hatfield thrust the pieces of type in his pocket, standing by as the coroner made a perfunctory examination of Rockman's fatal bullet wound.

"Square through the spine," Fenton remarked. "Off-hand, I'd say Harry died instantly. But it's plain enough he drug himself from the press."

Leaving Fenton to take care of Harry Rockman's body, the Ranger ordered the crowd out of the print shop while he went over the building in search of clues. He found the back door and all the side windows locked.

"The Kiowa Killer was somebody Harry Rockman knew and trusted," the Ranger mused, heading for the front door. "Rockman let him in—and his friend put a gun against his back and pulled the trigger. The powder burns on his shirt prove the shot didn't come from a distance."

Pausing under the glare of Rockman's ceiling lamp, Jim Hatfield took the three pieces of type from his pocket and stared at them, moving them around as if solving a puzzle of some kind.

Laying the pieces of type out on a stone-topped composing table. Hatfield studied the three symbols intently. Why had Harry Rockman dragged himself from the printing press to his type cases, plucking these three particular specimens of type out of their compartments? Had Rockman, with his dying strength, been trying to leave behind some clue of his killer's name?

IT WAS plausible that the Kiowa Killer, after gunning the editor down, had tarried only long enough to drop his yellow card on the printing press, and then had left the building on the assumption that his victim was dead.

Suddenly, like a jigsaw puzzle fitting into place, Jim Hatfield believed he had divined the secret of the three bits of type he had found in the dead man's hand.

The ampersand symbol, "&", stood for the word "and". It was but the work of a moment to place the "W" in front of the "and" symbol, and the letter "A" behind it.

Arranged in this order, the pieces of type spelled out an intelligible two-syllable word, W&A, decipherable as W-AND-A!

"Wanda!"

The Lone Wolf whispered the name, the hairs on his neck-nape prickling. Had Harry Brockman's last act this side of eternity been to spell out the name of the man with whom he had nearly fought a gun duel a few hours before?

Sam Wanda was supposed to be on his way to El Paso, a three-day ride across the Guadalupe range. But it would have been simple for the saloonkeeper to double back to Brasada after dark, to finish the gunfight which Ted Bonesteel had interrupted between him and Rockman.

"There's a quick way to find out if Wanda is the Kiowa Killer," grunted the Ranger, reaching up to lower the counterbalanced ceiling lamp on its chains and extinguish it. "I ought to have the answer before daylight tomorrow. . . ."

No one saw Jim Hatfield ride out of Brasada ten minutes later. He had bridled and saddled Goldy without waking up the hostler at the livery barn, and left the Pecos cowtown through the rear of the stable.

Perhaps no man living had explored the two hundred and sixty-five thousand miles which comprised the Lone Star State more thoroughly than the Lone Wolf. That intimate knowledge of Texas out-trails served the Ranger in good stead tonight, as he sent Goldy pounding westward through the darkness.

From Brasada, located on the Pecos

River near the New Mexico border, it was a good hundred and fifty miles by crow-flight to the city of El Paso on the Rio Grande, where Sam Wanda was supposed to be going.

The shortest route to El Paso was the old Spanish Trail of the Conquistadores, crossing the rock-toothed Guadalupe Mountains along the route of a prehistoric Indian trail. In all probability, Sam Wanda would chose the Spanish Trail, for to deviate from that route would entail rough going through lesser passes in the Guadalupes.

From past experience in this little-known part of Texas, Hatfield knew that habitations were few and far between on the Spanish Trail. Fifty miles distant from Brasada, the old trading post known as the Camino Casa, or Trail House, had been built in the spurs of the Guadalupes to cater to passing travelers.

It was toward the Camino Casa that Hatfield was riding. Unless Sam Wanda camped along the trail tonight, a thing which was doubtful, for Hatfield had learned that Wanda had left town without a bedroll behind his saddle cantle, it was almost certain that the Lone Star Saloon boss would make his first night's camp at the Camino Casa.

"The trader there can tell me what time Wanda showed up at the Casa," Hatfield reasoned. "If he kept ridin' after he left Brasada this afternoon, he would have reached the Camino Casa before dark. But if he doubled back to gun Harry Rockman, he's somewheres on the trail ahead right this minute."

Goldy flung back the miles in a tireless canter. Twenty miles out of Brasada the wagon road which forked off to various outlying cattle ranches gave way to twisting, little-used trail, the route of the Conquistadores in the far-off days when Coronado's legions had searched for the Seven Cities of Cibola.

A LOPSIDED yellow moon wheeled over the horizon behind Hatfield around midnight, illuminating the staggered crests of the forbidding Guadalupes to westward.

It was a dry, semi-desert expanse, with cactus and buckbrush crowding Goldy off the trail entirely in places. Springs or water-holes were nonexistent. This was a land taken over by sidewinders and horned toads, *zopilote* hawks and range wolves. Vegetation was too sparse to permit even sheep raising between here and the foothills of the 'Lupes.

Topping a high ridge, Jim Hatfield reined up to give his magnificent sorrel time to blow. Lather dripped in foamy pads from Goldy's flanks. Only the fact that Hatfield kept the golden stallion in perfect condition at all times accounted for the thirty-odd miles they had put between them and Brasada.

Far to the west, a tiny pinpoint of light twinkled like a star against the ebony background of the 'Lupe Mountains. That would be the windows of the Trail House, beckoning desert travelers like a beacon, though it was still twenty-odd miles away.

Picking up his reins, Hatfield gigged his saddler on along the Spanish Trail, which stretched like a ribbon of gray ashes across the moon-drenchd terrain.

The Ranger rode with every sense alert, pausing every few miles to dismount and examine the trail for sign. Clearly visible in the eroded alkali dirt were the tracks of a steel-shod horse, heading westward. They were fresh tracks, as proved by the fact that the night breeze had not marred their outlines with drifting sand. In all probability they had been made by Sam Wanda's big palomino.

The sagebrush and tumbleweeds thinned, giving way to the dwarf loblolly pines which timbered the Guadalupes. Worry gnawed at the Ranger as he realized that the wind was at his back, carrying the sound of Goldy's hoofbeats far ahead of him. Instinct warned him to slow the sorrel to a walk, avoiding patches of lava rock where the ring of steel shoes on stone would advertise his approach for miles.

Emerging from a thicket of loblollys which enroached on the trail, Hatfield stiffened in saddle. The odor of woodsmoke was in his nostrils as the wind shifted, bearing down from the north. As the breeze changed direction again, the odor of burning mesquite chunks thinned off.

Dismounting and ground-hitching his sorrel, Hatfield slid his Winchester from its scabbard under his saddle fender and veered off the trail, following the black loblolly growth up a gentle rise to north-

ward. He levered a shell into the breech of the .30-30 as he gained the skyline, crouched low so as not to silhouette his full height against the moonlit sky.

Topping the rise, he caught sight of a campfire built under a cutbank at the mouth of a weed-choked draw, not fifty feet down the slope. A creamy-tailed palomino was nibbling at dry grama grass inside the circle of the firelight.

Somewhere off in the brush a *chacalaca* bird voiced its startled cry and winged off into the darkness. Simultaneously, the crouching Ranger saw a stir of movement on the ground near the campfire.

Hatfield bellied down, sliding his rifle ahead of him as he saw a man prop himself up on his elbow, away from the fire some twenty feet. The man had stretched out on his saddle blanket, using his saddle for a pillow.

Sam Wanda!

CHAPTER XV

At the Dry Camp

CLOSE as Hatfield was, he recognized the lean, Lincolnesque features of the Brasada saloonman. Wanda's head was cocked in an attitude of listening. Firelight glinted off the barrel of a six-shooter as Wanda pulled the weapon from its holster buckled to the swellfork pommel of his saddle.

Earing back the knurled hammer of his .30-30, Hatfield called out sharply from the hilltop overlooking Wanda's dry camp:

"Drop that gun and stand up, Wanda. You're covered."

With a startled oath, the frock-coated gambler leaped to his feet, staring into the darkness in an effort to trace the voice.

Then, defying Hatfield's warning, Wanda stooped to snatch up his saddle blanket and hurled it on top of the smoldering campfire, blotting out the red glow of the coals.

The Winchester roared and recoiled its butt-plate against Hatfield's shoulder as he squeezed off a shot, halting Sam Wanda in the act of leaping for the shelter of the draw.

"Don't shoot!" yelled the saloonman. "I ain't buckin' yore drop, busky!"

The vivid moonlight revealed that Wanda was up to no treachery. The big gambler had elevated both arms, and had dropped his six-gun at his feet, plainly visible in the moon rays.

Getting to his feet, Jim Hatfield ejected the spent cartridge from his Winchester and cranked the lever to reload, stalking down the slope toward Wanda's camp as he did so. Twenty feet away, Wanda called out hoarsely:

"So it's you, Hatfield. I wondered if yuh wouldn't light a shuck for Camino Casa as soon as yuh found out Harry Rockman had been gunned down."

Hatfield's jaw sagged in amazement as he drew a Colt .45 and left his bulky rifle leaning on Wanda's saddle. Coming in close, the Ranger kicked Wanda's six-gun to one side and frisked the gambler deftly, removing a derringer from under his left sleeve and a Paterson model .44 from a shoulder holster under Wanda's fustian coat.

"So yuh admit yuh're the Kiowa Killer?" asked the Ranger grimly. "I'm a little surprised, Wanda. Frankly, yuh ain't the man I suspected the most."

Wanda's face was a pale mask in the spectral moonglow.

"The Kiowa Killer?" he leered. "What makes yuh think that, Hatfield?"

The Ranger studied the gambler, amazed that Wanda should attempt to hide his guilt after confessing, perhaps in an off-guard moment, that he knew of Rockman's death.

"If yuh hadn't killed Rockman," Hatfield said, "yuh wouldn't have known about it at all. Yuh left Brasada at four-five o'clock. Rockman was shot around nine-thirty tonight."

Wanda inhaled deeply, his malevolent eyes fixed on the Lone Wolf's face.

"Hunker down and hear my story before yuh shoot off yore mouth, Ranger!" snarled the gambler. "Yuh're too cagey to pin me down with circumstantial evidence."

Hatfield laughed harshly, keeping his six-gun trained on Wanda's brisket, alert for a treacherous move.

"Yuh're under arrest for Rockman's killin'," he said. "If yuh want to talk, that's up to you, Wanda."

Wanda shrugged, lowering his arms to shoulder level.

"It's this way, Hatfield," he said wearily. "I was bedded down at the Trail House over yonder in the Guadalupes when I got a telegram from Brasada tellin' me about Rockman. I suppose yuh know the Overland Telegraph has a station at the Camino Casa?"

Hatfield scowled. This was totally unexpected news, but news which he could easily substantiate at the Casa.

"Telegram?" he echoed. "Who sent yuh that?"

For answer, Sam Wanda reached in an outer pocket of his Prince Albert coat and drew out a folded square of paper, bearing a scribbled message written by the Camina Casa telegraph operator.

WANDA handed the telegram to Hatfield, who accepted it warily with his left hand. Keeping his gun trained on the cool-voiced gambler, Hatfield read the blue-penciled message in the moonlight. It read:

SAMUEL WANDA,
CAMINA CASA, TEX.

HARRY ROCKMAN MURDERED BY KIOWA KILLER IN HIS SHOP TONIGHT BRASADA SUSPECTS YOU KILLED ROCKMAN AS RESULT YOUR FRACAS WITH HIM EARLIER TODAY ADVISE YOU TO HAVE TRADER AT CAMINO TELEGRAPH RANGER JIM HATFIELD HERE TO ESTABLISH YOUR ALIBI

THEODORE BONESTEEL

"There you have it, Hatfield," Wanda said exultantly. "I was routed out of bed at the Trail House to receive that message. I decided to go back to Brasada and report to you, as any innocent law-abiding citizen would have done."

Hatfield thrust the telegram into his pocket, his face puzzled. Had Ted Bonesteel's message been intended to tip off Wanda to make his escape? Yet Bonesteel could not have known where Hatfield had gone tonight.

"It's not far to Brasada," the Ranger said. "How come yuh rode twenty miles and then camped for the night?"

Wanda jerked his head toward his grazing palomino.

"My bronc threw a shoe a couple miles back. Went lame. I've got to hoof it the rest of the way, so I decided to wait for daylight."

Jim Hatfield slowly returned his six-gun to holster, his mind busy with many complex angles. Ted Bonesteel's telegram might have been waiting for Wanda at the Trail House, if Wanda had arrived at the trading post after slaying Harry Rockman. The Ranger decided against telling the gambler of the three pieces of type he had found in the dead printer's hand.

"Bonesteel was mighty anxious to tip yuh off about how saloon gossip was runnin' in town last night," Hatfield said suspiciously.

Wanda laughed softly. "Did yuh ever happen to think," he said, "that Bonesteel might have sent that telegram to mix you up in yore investigation, Hatfield?"

"Meanin' what?"

"Bonesteel knew his message might throw a scare into me, make me decide to vamose into Mexico rather than run the risk of bein' accused of Rockman's murder. In which case Brasada would always feel that I was the Kiowa Killer."

[*Turn page*]

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The Ranger nodded slowly. Wanda was a gambler, and perhaps tonight he was making the biggest bluff of his career.

"But why should Ted Bonesteel want to put it on you?" Hatfield demanded. "Yuh tryin' to insinuate that the Overland Telegraph operator is the Kiowa Killer?"

"He has as much reason to be the Kiowa Killer as I have," the gambler replied. "Here's somethin' yuh probably don't know, Hatfield, but Susan Reid owns ten thousand dollars' worth of stock in the Big Seven Freight Syndicate. Ted Bonesteel aims to marry Susan, in which case, under the laws of Texas, he'll have a legal interest in the Big Seven, bein' the husband of one of the stockholders. There's yore reason why Ted Bonesteel could be the Kiowa Killer—out to do in the rest of the Big Seven and, as Susan's husband, wind up as the controllin' man of a million-dollar business!"

It was nearly noon the following day when Jim Hatfield rode into Brasada. His return to the cowtown had been delayed by the fact that Sam Wanda had been forced to walk the thirty miles back to town in order to spare his lame saddle horse. The gambler had spurned the Ranger's offer to ride double on Goldy, claiming that his sedentary life made him need exercise anyway.

"Yuh can consider yorself under technical arrest, Wanda," Hatfield said, after they turned in their horses at the livery stable. "Yuh'll have to forget yore trip to El Paso till this deal is cleared up. Is that clear?"

SAM WANDA slumped on a bench beside the stable door, mopping his haggard face with a silk handkerchief.

"I'll be around town when yuh need me, Ranger," he promised. "Yuh still ain't shore whether or not I killed Rockman last night, are yuh? Yuh think I got as far as that dry camp where yuh found me, that I never reached Camino Casa at all?"

Hatfield hitched up his gun-belts. His releasing the hawkfaced gambler on his own recognizance was in the nature of a gamble, but he felt increasingly sure of his ground.

"If yuh mean that Bonesteel's telegram absolves yuh of suspicion, yuh're wrong, Wanda," Hatfield admitted. "That message was written on Overland Telegraph forms, but yuh could have stolen a pad of blanks from Bonesteel's office here in Brasada. I haven't got any proof as yet that it came from the operator at Camino Casa."

Turning on his heel, Hatfield made his way to the Overland Telegraph office opposite the courthouse plaza. He found Ted Bonesteel busy at his key, sending a long message for the Big Seven Freight Syndicate to a San Antonio firm.

When Bonesteel had finished and closed the switch, to open his line, the handsome young telegrapher greeted Hatfield cheerily and crossed the office to where the Ranger waited.

"Did you send this message to Camino Casa last night?"

Bonesteel read the telegram which Hatfield handed him.

"Yes," he admitted. "I tried to locate you and ask yore advice, but yuh'd left town or somethin'. So I wired the operator at Camino Casa to give this message to Wanda if he was there, in which case he couldn't have killed Rockman. I told the operator to hold Wanda if he showed up later."

Hatfield's greenish eyes flashed angrily.

"Are yuh shore yuh wasn't tryin' to tip Wanda off so he could make his escape?"

The red-headed telegraph operator flushed.

"Wanda is no friend of mine," he said. "Up until tonight, I've suspected he was the Kiowa Killer. As it was, my telegram to Camino Casa would have got Wanda captured if his gettin' there had been delayed."

Hatfield nodded slowly. If Bonesteel had acted in good faith last night, he had shown rare good judgment.

As the Ranger turned to go, Bonesteel called him back. Drawing open a drawer at his side, he took out a yellow Overland Telegraph envelope.

"This is a message I took off the wire just before daylight, Hatfield," he said. "It's addressed to you, and it's from the trader who runs Camino Casa. It should prove why I'm shore about Sam Wanda's innocence, at least as far as Harry Rockman's killin' was concerned."

Frowning curiously, Hatfield slit open

the envelope and read the Overland Telegraph message:

TEXAS RANGER JIM HATFIELD
CARE OF THEODORE BONESTEEL
BRASADA TEXAS

THIS IS TO ADVISE YOU THAT SAMUEL WANDA ARRIVED AT CAMINO CASA SHORTLY AFTER SUNDOWN YESTERDAY INTENDING TO SPEND NIGHT HERE. HE WAS ASLEEP IN BED AT TIME MURDER WAS COMMITTED IN BRASADA.

GEORGE KISHOR
PROP., TRAIL HOUSE

"I agree that this looks like Wanda couldn't have come back to town and killed Rockman last night," Hatfield said. "Of course if yuh didn't fake this alibi message yoreself, Ted."

Without giving the shocked telegrapher a chance to think up an answer to his insinuation, Hatfield left the telegraph office and went over to the Chinese restaurant. His stomach was reminding him that he had missed breakfast that morning as a result of his trek down the Spanish Trail.

CHAPTER XVI

Sixth Warning

MEAL finished, Hatfield paused in the doorway of the restaurant to roll a cigarette. He saw Red Jack Skellet come out of the Brasada post office clutching an envelope in his hand.

"Is that you, Hatfield?" Skellet called, tapping his white cane along the sidewalk as he approached the restaurant.

"That's right," Hatfield answered. "I was just about to head for Fenton's office to check up on his verdict in the Harry Rockman killin'. I'm curious to know if Rockman was killed instantly, as Fenton seemed to think."

Sun glinting off his black spectacles, Skellet held his envelope in the Ranger's general direction.

"Mind readin' this mail for me?" he asked. "I used to get Todd Kramer to read my letters for me, but—"

"Shore thing, pard," Hatfield said, glancing at the envelope. It bore a Brasada postmark, dated this morning. "Let's hope it's not a bill or—"

Hatfield broke off, as a yellow rectangle of cardboard slid out of the torn-open envelope and dropped into his hand. Printed in Condensed Gothic type on the postcard-sized placard was a grim message:

I'LL GIVE YOU A FULL WEEK TO CLOSE YOUR SHOP AND GET OUT OF BRASADA FOR KEEPS, SKELLET, BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO TAKE UNDUE ADVANTAGE OF A BLIND HOMBRE. IGNORE THIS WARNING AND YOU WILL BE THE SIXTH VICTIM OF

THE KIOWA KILLER

"What is it, Hatfield?" demanded Red Jack, his faltering voice indicative of the fact that his uncanny intuition had warned him that something was wrong. "What's the letter say? Is it bad news or somethin'?"

Sweat-beads broke out on Hatfield's pores. He cleared his voice unsteadily.

"It's—nothin', Red Jack," he lied, stalling for time. "Just an advertisement from a leather wholesaler in Denver."

Skellet appeared to study the Ranger through his dark glasses, but a pulse was jumping on a knotted vein across his scrawny throat.

"Yuh—yuh're lyin' to me, Hatfield!" whispered the saddlemaker, swallowing hard. "I think I know what that letter is. I been expectin' it. I could tell it was a piece of cardboard from the feel of it. It's a death-warnin' from the Kiowa Killer, to me. I feel it inside— Is it?"

The Lone Wolf laid a gentle hand on Skellet's shoulder.

"Yes it is, Skellet," he confessed. "I couldn't decide whether to tip yuh off out of a blue sky or wait a while till I'd figgered some way to protect yuh."

They moved off into the middle of the street, to make sure no one overheard them while Hatfield read the Kiowa Killer's grim message.

When he had finished, Red Jack Skellet inhaled deeply.

"'Well," he said shakily, "I reckon I'll tell yuh a secret, Hatfield. I—I'm one of the stockholders of the Big Seven Freight Syndicate."

"Yes?" Hatfield could not divulge the fact that this information had been given to him by Injun Jim Buffalo yesterday, having given the Big Seven secretary his oath of secrecy. "But what has that got to do with the Kiowa Killer, Skellet?"

The blind man shook his head vaguely.

"Mebbe nothin'—mebbe everything," he said heavily. "Before Todd Karmer was stabbed with that bayonet the other day, he confided in me. The sheriff thinks the Kiowa Killer is one of the Big Seven stockholders out to get rid of all his pardners and gain full ownership of the syndicate."

Taking Skellet's arm, Hatfield led the blind man off the street to make way for an incoming train of mule-drawn freight wagons, arriving from Fort Stockton with a shipment of lumber. By the time they had crossed the sidewalk, Jim Hatfield had made up his mind.

"Skellet, yuh're no coward," he said. "In fact, for my money yuh've got more courage than any two men in Brasada put together. But yuh've got to leave town. Even a man without your handicap would be foolish to stick around after the Kiowa Killer warned him to vamose."

RED JACK SKELLET nodded hopelessly.

"Well," he said, "I—I been plannin' to leave for New York to get my eyes operated on. I might as well lock up shop and head for the East now, while I can. But it rubs my fur the wrong way, bein' the first man in Brasada to rabbit out on account of the Kiowa Killer."

Hatfield consulted his pocket watch.

"It's two-fifteen," he said. "There's a Wells Fargo stage pullin' out for Lubbock and Amarillo at four sharp. Think yuh can be ready by then?"

"I reckon so. Yuh won't tell nobody the real reason why I'm hightailin', will yuh?" He spoke with an almost boyish anxiety. "Yuh'll tell people I'm headin' East to get an operation to fix up my eyesight, Hatfield?"

The Ranger slapped the blind man on the back.

"Shore, pard. How are yuh fixed for money? Those New York medicos come pretty high, for a delicate operation like you'll need."

Skellet gestured toward the Stockman's Bank building with his horny thumb.

"The Big Seven has paid enough dividends to cover my operation," he said almost cheerfully, "and what time I have to spend in a hospital will be paid out of future dividends. I'm not worryin' about the dinero, Hatfield."

Two hours later, the weekly Panhandle stage-coach pulled out of Brasada. The usual crowd of curious onlookers was on on hand to bid Red Jack Skellet farewell as the stocky locksmith, decked out in his best sombrero and tweed suit, climbed aboard the yellow-painted Concord.

A cheer broke out as the stage rumbled away from the Wells Fargo station, with Skellet waving from a canvas-curtained window. There was an element of pathos in the saddlemaker's departure, for Doc Brunton, the local medical man, had confided to the public while in his cups that Skellet's optimism over recovering his sight was not justified by the facts. Even the wizardry of New York surgeons could not achieve a miracle, Doc Brunton had said. . . .

For the first time since his arrival in Brasada days before, Jim Hatfield called at the post office to see if any mail had been addressed to him in care of General Delivery. It was possible that Captain Bill had written him by now, using the alias "James H. Field".

The bespectacled postmaster thumbed through his pigeonhole marked "F" and shook his head. "Nothing here for Field," he said, "but I got a letter for Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf grinned at the postmaster's uncertainty.

"I'm not working undercover on this Brasada job," he chuckled. "I'll take the Hatfield mail."

The postmaster handed him an envelope with his name printed in crude capital letters. It bore yesterday's postmark and had been mailed in Brasada.

Even as he touched the envelope, the Ranger felt an electric thrill course through him. He could tell that the missive contained a square of postcard, not letter paper.

Two minutes later, Jim Hatfield sauntered into the Lone Star Saloon. Sam Wanda himself was serving customers behind the bar. Although the hour was still early for saloon trade, Hatfield recog-

nized a number of customers lined up at the brass rail—Ted Bonesteel, Injun Jim Buffalo, Josh Fenton, Lefty Grote of the Big Seven warehouse, the stable tender who took care of Goldy's grooming and graining.

"Drinks are on the house this afternoon, Hatfield!" called out Wanda. "Yuh're just in time to drink a toast to Red Jack Skellet. He's headed for New York to get his eyes fixed and we're drinkin' to his good luck."

THE Lone Wolf accepted three fingers of Bourbon and entered into the toast. His face was grave as he replaced the glass on the bar.

"Yuh look all-fired glum, Ranger!" spoke up Josh Fenton. "Harry Rockman's killin' get yuh down, amigo?"

Hatfield started, as if the coroner had interrupted a deep-grained revery.

"No," he said bleakly. "But I got some mail just now that—well, see for yoreself, boys."

As he spoke, Hatfield took an envelope from his shirt pocket, drew a square of yellow cardboard from it, and slid the card across the bar.

With trembling fingers, Sam Wanda picked up the card. It bore a message printed in familiar Condensed Gothic type. Wanda's voice was shaky as he read aloud:

MY BULLET MISSED YOU OUT ON THE BOX B ROAD YESTERDAY, HATFIELD. THIS IS TO WARN YOU THE SAME AS I WARNED BOOJUM VOZAR LAST WEEK—TO GET OUT OF TOWN THIS WEEK—GET OUT TODAY OR YOU WON'T BE ALIVE TO SEE THE SUN RISE IN THE MORNING.

THE KIOWA KILLER

Wanda looked up, his face ashen. Every eye in the saloon was trained on the indomitable figure of the Texas Ranger.

"This is your Boot Hill ticket, Hatfield. What yuh aim to do about it?"

The Lone Wolf's green eyes shuttled over the faces of the men at the bar and fumbled in his shirt pocket for tobacco and husks. Opening the sack of Durham with his teeth, the Ranger said calmly:

"I'm settin' tight, gents. I didn't get a wink of sleep last night, so I figger to bunk down in my room at the Ritz Palace and catch up on my shut-eye tonight."

Injun Jim Buffalo was the first man in the rigid tableau to break his trance. The half-breed came forward, reaching out to touch the Ranger's arm.

"But that—that's suicide, senor!" the Box B rancher whispered hoarsely. "The Kiowa Killer didn't let Boojum Vozar live to see a sunrise—and he won't let you!"

Tobacco sack dangling by its drawstring from his teeth, Jim Hatfield stared at Buffalo thoughtfully.

"It happens," he said, "that I know who the Kiowa Killer is. Forewarned is forearmed. I have an advantage that Boojum Vozar didn't have. At any rate, I don't aim to let the Kiowa Killer scare me out of town tonight."

CHAPTER XVII

"Leave Town, Jim!"

PROMPTLY at five o'clock, Susan Reid locked up her office in the courthouse and left the building. She found Ted Bonesteel waiting for her at the foot of the courthouse steps.

"All set to go horseback riding before supper, Ted?" the girl called cheerily. "Or had you forgotten our date? I don't see the horses waiting?"

The telegrapher's face was grave as he stood up, ignoring her face upturned for a kiss.

"I want yuh to go home and stay there, Sue," Bonesteel said huskily. "There'll be lead flyin' around this burg tonight and I've got to know yuh'll be safe."

Susan Reid stared, unable to tell whether Bonesteel was joking or not.

"Lead will fly—what are you talking about, Ted?"

Bonesteel took the girl's hands in his own.

"The Kiowa Killer has warned that Texas Ranger to leave town, just like he did the others, Sue," Bonesteel said gravely. "And Hatfield, bonehead that he is, chooses to do the dramatic thing and stay in town. He'll be dead before sunrise, yuh can bank on that."

"But Ted—"

"They're layin' ten-to-one odds down at

Sam Wanda's that the Kiowa Killer will make good his threat. Hatfield was loco enough to advertise the fact that he aims to spend the night in his room at the Ritz Palace."

Terror glazed Susan Reid's eyes as her glance strayed out across the sage flats to where the Brasada cemetery lay against the Pecos' west bank. She could see the two fresh mounds where her grandfather and Boojum Vozar had been buried only yesterday. A pair of Mexican gravediggers were at work inside the Boot Hill fence, preparing Harry Rockman's last resting place.

"Ted, we've got to do something! We can't let a fine man like Jim Hatfield gamble his life against something that no—no mortal man can prevent!"

There was a note of hysteria in the girl's voice as she finished speaking.

"That's Hatfield's business, if he wants to commit suicide!" Bonesteel said sharply. "My hunch is that the killer will ambush the Ranger, mebbe on the main street in full sight of everybody, before Hatfield has a chance to lock hisself in his room. And as yore future husband, I have the right to guarantee yore safety against a stray bullet."

Breaking free of Bonesteel's grasp, Susan headed at a run across the courthouse plaza.

"Sue!" the telegrapher bellowed after her. "Where are yuh goin'?"

She flung an answer across her shoulder:

"I'm going," she cried, "to see if I can argue some sense into that Ranger that Gramp sent for!"

Susan caught sight of Jim Hatfield emerging from a mercantile store where he had purchased a pair of socks. She reached his side before Bonesteel could overtake the girl.

"Well, Miss Reid!" chuckled the Lone Wolf, tipping his Stetson. "In a hurry to get somewheres?"

She grasped his arm, looking imploringly into his smiling face.

"Leave town, Jim!" she begged. "I heard—about the Kiowa Killer's warning. Forget that you're a Ranger, forget your foolish devotion to duty, Jim Hatfield! No man will brand you for a coward if you leave Brasada tonight."

Hatfield glanced up to see Bonesteel come to a panting halt, grabbing the girl's elbow roughly.

"Yuh're goin' home, Sue!" cried the telegrapher. "It's dangerous to be anywheres near Jim Hatfield from now on."

Hatfield's grin widened.

"A plumb fine idea, Bonesteel. Brasada's main street it no place for a woman tonight, Miss Reid."

TURNING his back, Hatfield crossed the street in the direction of the Ritz Palace Hotel, aware that every porch and arcade along the street was deserted. Men were keeping off the streets of Brasada this evening.

Entering the hotel lobby, Hatfield was not surprised to find it deserted. Men were avoiding the Ritz Palace as if they thought the flea-ridden cowtown hostelry was a dynamite magazine set to explode under their feet.

Taking the key to Room 13 from its hook over the clerk's desk, Hatfield went upstairs.

The corridor leading to his room at the far end could be reached only from the lobby stairs. No other exit opened off the long hallway.

All this was a fact which the Ranger took into careful consideration. If the Kiowa Killer sought to attack him in Room 13 tonight, his only way to reach the bedroom would be through the downstairs lobby and along the dark hallway.

Inside the room, the Lone Wolf glanced overhead to confirm his memory. There was no attic in the Ritz Palace. No skulking killer could crawl over the ceiling of Room 13 and shoot at his intended victim through a knothole. The sloping ceiling of Hatfield's bedroom was a series of steeply-pitched rafters covered with weatherbeaten shingles.

The room had but one window. Going to it, Hatfield ran up the sash and peered outside.

Ten feet away was the unpainted wall of the Brasada Grand Opera House, its swaybacked roof showing bald spots where time and the elements had ripped off patches of shingles. The theater had been turned over to the spiders for twenty years now, ever since the big cattle drives had ceased going up the Loving-Goodnight Trail to the northern railheads.

On a level with the window of his bed-

room were a series of windows marking backstage dressing rooms of the Opera House. At least three of them would give a drygulcher a view of Jim Hatfield's room in the hotel adjoining.

"The only possible way the Kiowa Killer could draw a bead on me or chuck a short-fused stick of dynamite into my room," Hatfield concluded, "would be from one of those three windows in the abandoned theater. It ain't likely he'd risk comin' up the hallway from the public lobby."

Seating himself at the rickety table beside the window, Hatfield took a stub of pencil from his pocket, found a sheet of lining paper in the table drawer, and proceeded to draw up a list which he labeled "Possible Suspects". Although he had already reached his private decision as to the Kiowa Killer's identity, Hatfield believed in checking all possible suspects thoroughly, so as to study them in black and white.

(1) JOSH FENTON, coroner. Could have lied about cause of Boojum Vozar's death. Could have slipped card into Vozar's shirt before autopsy. Could have killed Rockman when editor caught him setting up type for one of his yellow cards. Was Rockman's employer, so had keys to print shop in all probability. Owned Big Seven Stock.

(2) TED BONESTEEL. Not Big Seven member but would be if he married Susan Reid, under Texas' community property laws. Could have faked telegrams concerning Sam Wanda's visit to Camino Casa, etc.

(3) SUSAN REID. Secret stockholder in Big Seven. Might be working in collusion with Bonesteel. Had opportunity to poison Boojum Vozar at latter's last meal in her home.

(4) RED JACK SKELLET. Lost eyesight while working for Big Seven. Could have revenge motive against stockholders. Received threat from Kiowa Killer, left town.

(5) INJUN JIM BUFFALO. Owned rifle used in attempt to ambush me. Secretary of Big Seven. Of Kiowa ancestry. Could have been rider who ambushed me on Pecos road.

(6) SAM WANDA. Known enemy of Sheriff Kramer. Had quarrel with Rockman; could have murdered Rockman. His name found in type on Rockman's body. Could have poisoned Boojum Vo—

Hatfield was interrupted by the sound of steps thudding up the corridor. He dropped his pencil and whirled about, drawing a six-gun as he heard the steps halt outside Room 13.

He waited, gun ready, holding his breath.

"Are yuh in there, Hatfield?" called a hushed voice.

TIPTOEING to one side, out of the range of vision of the door's keyhole, the Lone Wolf answered crisply:

"Who is it?"

"Lefty Grote. I—uh—was sent here by a delegation of town citizens to have a talk with you, Jim."

Hatfield paused, then went over to the door and opened it, gun ready at his side.

The burly foreman of the Big Seven warehouses stood at the threshold, twisting his sombrero uneasily between his fingers. So far as Hatfield could tell, Grote was unarmed.

"Come on in, Grote." Hatfield grinned. "I suppose the town wants yuh to argue me into pullin' stakes before the Kiowa Killer blows this hotel off the map, is that it?"

Grote stepped into the room and stood fidgeting there. His eyes avoided meeting the Ranger's.

"N-no," he stammered. "But Susan Reid—she's got busy and organized a sort of posse to protect the hotel during the night. They want me to tell yuh about it."

Hatfield holstered his gun and shoved a chair out to Grote. The big ramrod of the Big Seven wagoneers remained standing. He was obviously anxious to leave as soon as possible.

"It's like this," Grote went on nervously. "Half the town's goin' to spend the night in the lobby downstairs, just to make shore the Killer—whoever he is—don't go up them stairs. And I, personally, aim to squat at the end of the hall, to make shore nobody enters or leaves the hotel."

Hatfield chuckled. "How about the other guests in the other rooms?"

Grote shook his head, scowling.

"Nobody's allowed upstairs till after the sunrise deadline in the mornin', Hatfield. Matter of fact, none of the other roomers dare to be anywheres close to Room Thirteen. Why did they have to put yuh in a room with such an unlucky number?"

Hatfield accompanied Lefty Grote to the door.

"Tell Miss Reid and her vigilante committee *muchas gracias* for stakin' a night's sleep in my behalf, Lefty," he said. "In the meantime, how about you and me goin' over to the restaurant and havin' a bite of supper?"

Grote's eyes rolled in their sockets.

"Yuh better not eat or drink nothin' a-tall tonight," warned the Big Seven foreman. "Don't forget Boojum Vozar got the same kind of warnin' you did, and he died of pizenin'."

The Ranger closed and locked his door and accompanied the syndicate boss down the hall.

"Lefty," Hatfield said, "I aim to bait a trap for the Kiowa Killer tonight, I'll need three buckets of paint to do the job. Yuh got any paint stored down at the syndicate warehouses?"

Grote stared curiously at the Lone Wolf as they started down the stairs.

"Yeah, I got over a gross of gallon buckets of that yaller paint we use on the Big Seven mud wagons," he said. "But how yuh aim to trap anybody with paint?"

Jim Hatfield grinned mysteriously.

"That," he said tantalizingly, "remains to be seen, Lefty. . . ."

Indigo twilight had given way to star-spangled nightfall by the time Jim Hatfield had finished a leisurely, but solitary supper at the Chinese cafe on the main street.

The Oriental's oblique eyes bulged with relief when the Ranger paid his check, selected a toothpick from the dish by the till, and slammed the screen door behind him. The Chinese had expected an ambush bullet to crash though his shuttered windows and kill his lone customer during every minute Jim Hatfield had been eating.

The Ranger followed a side street to the rear of the Big Seven Syndicate's warehouses, climbed a loading ramp and rapped lightly on a sliding door. Lefty Grote had promised to meet him at this rendezvous as soon as it got dark.

But apparently Grote's nerve had left him. No sound came from the warehouse.

Then, in the act of moving along the warehouse platform toward the next door, Hatfield's boots thudded against something left against the wall. Squatting in the darkness, he groped out to feel the outlines of three gallon buckets.

"Grote left the paint, anyhow," the Ranger muttered. "That's the main thing."

CHAPTER XVIII

Vigil in Room Thirteen

BALANCING the three buckets by looping his arm through the bails, so as to keep one gun hand free for emergencies, Hatfield angled away from the Big Seven yards, picked through a maze of Conestoga wagons belonging to the syndicate, and worked his way across weed-grown back lots until he was behind the black mass of the Ritz Plaza Hotel.

Immediately west of the cowtown hostelry was the Grand Opera House. It was toward this that Jim Hatfield now made his way, moving with infinite stealth to avoid stepping on the tin cans and assorted junk which littered the back alley. He could not be sure whether or not Susan Reid's "Vigilantes" had posted a cordon of guards around the hotel.

Reaching the weatherbeaten rear wall of the Grand Opera House, Hatfield worked his way around into the alley between the abandoned theater and the hotel. Fifteen feet above him was the window of his bedroom.

His previous inspection of the theater building from the window of Room 13 had revealed the stage door of the Opera House, hanging ajar on its rusted hinges. Feeling his way through total blackness, Hatfield wedged his way through the doorway without having to open it wider.

A faint wash of starshine coming through a skylight high overhead gave Hatfield enough light to recognize certain objects inside the barnlike building.

A maze of canvas props and flats were stacked against the rear wall. The stage was thick with dust and littered with debris. A motheaten curtain hung over the row of coal-oil footlights which extended between the tarnished gilt arches of the proscenium.

Dimly visible in the gloom was a spiral staircase leading to the dressing rooms backstage. Hatfield tiptoed his way to the stairs and was grateful to find that they were of iron, the treads giving off no telltale squeak under his weight.

Arrived at the gallery overlooking the backstage area, the Texas Ranger groped his way along a series of open doors where the jugglers, acrobats, magicians, singers and dancers of a bygone era had once daubed on their greasepaint and changed their costumes. In its heyday, Brasada's Opera House had been as famous on the Frontier as the Birdcage Theater over in Tombstone, Arizona.

Setting down his three buckets of paint, Hatfield loosened his six-guns in holsters and paused in the clotted shadows, ears straining. But the cavernous auditorium beyond the stage was deserted. Wind moaned around the eaves and through the broken shingles where stars peeped through the roof. A bat fluttered past Hatfield's face with a rush of wind. Somewhere off in the tangle of curtain ropes beyond the gallery railing, a rat was gnawing away at a wooden timber.

Hatfield groped through one of the dressing room doors, seeing the square gray outline marking a window. In silhouette against the opening was the upright post of an old-fashioned bedstead. Brasada's theatrical troupes, apparently, had slept in their dressing rooms.

The window had long since lost its glass. Leaning over the warped sill, Hatfield saw that he was in the room exactly opposite the window of his own hotel bedroom.

Floor boards creaked under the Ranger's weight as he tiptoed outside the dressing room and picked up one of the buckets of yellow paint which Lefty Grote had left for him from the Big Seven's warehouse stock.

He pried open the lid of the paint bucket and discarded it. Then, working by touch alone, Hatfield pulled the door of the dressing room until it was nearly shut, and balanced the open bucket of paint on its upper edge, the rim of the bucket resting against the door frame for support.

Any prowler who attempted to enter the dressing room would upset the paint bucket and spill its contents over himself.

WITH the remaining buckets of paint, Hatfield set similar traps on top of the doors leading into the adjoining dressing rooms which were opposite his hotel room. His preliminary plans completed, the Lone Wolf went back down the spiral stairway, crossed the musty-smelling backstage area and slipped out through the alley door.

Lefty Grote had warned him that guards would be placed at the alley entrance and exit as soon as Hatfield was back in his room, to forestall any attempt on the Kiowa Killer's part to place a ladder against the Ranger's window during the night. Rather than risk being shot down by a boogery-triggered guard, Jim Hatfield made a circuit of the Grand Opera House, arriving at the main street facade of the theater.

Hatfield now paused to check the front door of the Opera House and found it locked. He next made a trip to the livery stable where Goldy was stabled. The sorrel whickered a greeting as the Ranger passed his stall and obtained his lariat rope from his saddle pommel.

"With any kind of luck tonight, Goldy," Hatfield confided in the horse, "we'll be hitting the trail back to headquarters sometime tomorrow, to report another case finished when we see Cap'n Bill."

Arriving back at the hotel, his lass'-rope coiled over one arm, Hatfield found the Ritz lobby jammed. Judging from the crowd assembled there, every barroom and gambling den in town must be empty tonight.

Susan Reid, her eyes wide and anxious, elbowed her way through the crowded lobby as Hatfield entered.

"Can't you stay down here tonight, Jim?" she implored him. "There's safety in numbers. The Kiowa Killer wouldn't dare show himself to attack you."

The lobby throng waited in breath-held suspense for the big Ranger to speak.

"I didn't get to sleep last night," he said, grinning. "I'm plumb tuckered out. With this guard yuh've put around the hotel, Miss Reid, there ain't a chance for the Kiowa Killer to reach my bedroom. So I aim to get a good night's rest. So I can enjoy tomorrow mornin's sunrise."

Injun Jim Buffalo caught the Lone Wolf's eye.

"That's what Boojum Vozar said," he reminded Hatfield glumly. "The Kiowa Killer always makes good on his threats."

Hatfield shrugged, shifting the weight of his coiled reata over his forearm.

"It may surprise yuh to know," he said, "that the Kiowa Killer's already made *three* attempts on my life. Why should

he make good on his fourth try, Buffalo?"

Sam Wanda and Josh Fenton were seated on the bottom step as Hatfield arrived at the staircase. They stood up, eyeing the Ranger dubiously.

"If Sheriff Kramer was alive, he wouldn't let yuh go through with this crazy idea, Hatfield," Wanda said. "Ain't there anything we can do to keep yuh out of that room?"

Hatfield shouldered in between Wanda and the coroner. Midway up the stairs, he turned to survey the anxious faces massed in the lamplight below. He saw Ted Bonesteel standing alongside Susan Reid. The girl appeared to be sobbing quietly.

"As long as I've got so many friends pullin' for me, I reckon I'm plumb safe!" Hatfield chuckled. "Good night, amigos."

At the top of the stairs, the Ranger found Lefty Grote seated on a Morris chair on the landing, a double-barreled shotgun cradled across his lap, a deer rifle leaning against the wall by his chair. From this vantage point, Grote had a clear view of the entire length of the hallway, as well as the lobby stairway.

"Yuh found the paint?" he whispered anxiously, as Hatfield reached the landing. "I decided not to wait for yuh at the warehouse, wanted to make shore the Kiowa Killer didn't slip into yore room while yuh was out."

THE Ranger nodded. He noticed that the corridor was no longer dark. Lefty Grote had hung a lighted lantern on alternate doorknobs down the entire length of the hall.

"Jim, I'm superstitious about things where the Kiowa Killer is concerned," the Big Seven foreman said hoarsely. "I'd like to shake yore hand. Because I don't think yuh'll be alive when dawn breaks tomorrow."

Hatfield shook Grote's ham-sized paw, suppressing a smile as he realized that the beefy wagon boss meant every word in dead earnestness.

"Thanks for the optimistic words, Lefty. Yuh wouldn't want to make any bets on that, would yuh?"

Grote shook his head.

"Dead men can't pay off wagers," the foreman said gloomily. "*Buenas noches*, Jim."

Heading down the hall, Hatfield unlocked his door and stepped into Room 13. He moved the table away from the window and slung his coil of lass'-rope over a bedpost.

Stepping to the window, Hatfield stood staring at the dressing room windows across the alley. Below, in the darkness, he could see the ebb and glow of cigarettes, as guards conversed with each other at the two ends of the alley.

Hatfield jacked open his Peacemakers and slipped an extra shell into the empty chamber he carried under his gunhammer. Then he stretched out on the rickety bed and relaxed in the darkness.

Despite his comments to the crowd in the lobby downstairs, the Lone Wolf had no intention of going to sleep tonight. He doubted if the Kiowa Killer would strike before the black hours preceding dawn.

But that the mysterious killer would strike, Hatfield was certain. And the lawman would be ready for the attack when it came.

Fatigue and nervous strain caused Jim Hatfield to doze off in spite of himself, but he slept lightly, as a hunted animal sleeps, his subconscious standing guard on the alert to awaken him at the slightest sound.

The white eye of the Texas moon, glaring through the open window of Room 13, roused the Texas Ranger. Consulting his watch, he was astonished to see that it was 3:45 in the morning. Dawn was only and hour away.

He got off the bed, stretched and yawned. Peeping through the keyhole, he caught sight of Lefty Grote crouched in his chair at the far end of the hall, his shotgun guarding the only possible approach to Room 13.

Hatfield had placed a chair alongside the wall to the left of the open window. He seated himself there, restraining an impulse to build himself a smoke.

The courthouse clock tolled the half-hour, and an eternity later chimed the three-quarter mark. The moon slid down behind the sway-backed ridgepole of the Grand Opera House roof, throwing the alley and the hotel wall into shadow.

Every nerve tinglingly alive, Hatfield continued his vigil. He left his chair to pick the coiled reata off his bedpost, then returned to his station beside the window.

The courthouse clock struck four. At this season of the year, dawn was due in

another eight minutes. If the Kiowa Killer had not been bluffing, he would have to act soon!

CHAPTER XIX

"There's Your Killer!"

ON THE last reverberating note of the courthouse clock, as it was trembling into nothingness across the night air, a crash sounded inside one of the dressing rooms of the theater across the alley. It was followed by a grunt of surprise and fear and a dull clatter of booted feet along the resounding catwalk of the backstage gallery.

"My trick worked!" exulted Hatfield.

Moving swiftly, the Lone Wolf shook out the loop of his lariat and moved to the window. A dozen feet away he could make out the dim outlines of the bedpost inside the dressing room opposite.

With a range rider's inbred skill and the training of long practise with a lariat, Hatfield sent his noose snaking out across the alley and into the dressing room window. The loop settled over the bedpost, a simple feat for a cowboy-raised lawman who had roped uncounted hundreds of longhorn steers on the open range, from the hurricane deck of a peg pony.

Tugging the slack taut, Hatfield lashed the end of the lariat securely to his own bedpost. Then, straddling over the window sill, the Ranger leaped out into space, his strong hands locked over the rope which spanned the black alley fifteen feet above the ground.

The rope sagged slightly under Hatfield's weight, but the pleated rawhide had the strength to hold a struggling bull ten times the Ranger's bulk.

Invisible to the eyes of the guards at either end of the alley, the Lone Wolf swung his way hand-over-hand across the brief space, until his cowboots touched the clapboard wall of the Grand Opera House. A moment later he was gripping the window sill of the dressing room and hoisting himself inside the theater.

Moonlight, penciling in through breaks in the roof of the theater, revealed the puddle of lemon-yellow paint which covered the threshold of the dressing room and spattered the wide-open door. The Kiowa Killer, then, had chosen to enter the middle of the three dressing rooms opposite Room 13.

Guns palmed, the Lone Wolf leaped over the sprawling pool of paint and sidestepped quickly to put himself out of the bar of moonlight slanting down from the skylight.

From somewhere at the far end of the backstage gallery, a gunshot blasted echoes inside the abandoned theater and a bullet slammed into the flimsy wall beside the Ranger.

Dropping to a squat, Hatfield tripped gunhammers, firing at the spurt of boreflame he had seen at the far end of the catwalk. A yell of desperation and rage followed the thunder of Hatfield's Peacemakers.

For an instant the Ranger believed his bullets had struck a human target, and then his ears picked up the sharp rataplan of boots as the Kiowa Killer raced around the corner of the gallery, heading for the top of the spiral staircase. Flame spat from the darkness there and a slug ricocheted from the iron railing in front of Hatfield. Gunsmoke blossomed in a blue-white smudge in a shaft of moonlight twenty feet away.

The Kiowa Killer was scrambling in wild flight down the spiral stairs now. Once he reached the stage level, he stood a chance to escape the Opera House building from any one of a number of doors or windows.

Holstering his guns, Hatfield leaped to the top of the gallery guard railing, balancing on the iron balustrade. The backstage floor was twenty feet below, but the Ranger leaped toward a taut rope used for raising and lowering the asbestos curtain.

The big rope burned Hatfield's palms as he slid floorward like a fireman gliding down a greased brass pole. His boots landed on the floor before the Kiowa Killer had succeeded in reaching the foot of the spiral stairway.

LEAPING back into shadow, the Lone Wolf snatched .45s from leather and charged forward, aiming to block the Killer's escape from the foot of the dressing room stairs.

Even as he did so, he caught sight of a hurtling figure flashing past a bar of moonlight, as the Kiowa Killer gave up the idea of traveling down the iron stairway and leaped headlong for the floor.

The warped floorboards of the stage trembled under the impact of the Killer's landing, and simultaneously the fugitive opened fire at the Ranger's approaching figure. With screaming lead bracketing his body, Hatfield flung himself flat on the stage.

Hunter and fugitive lay there, waiting for the other to make a move, to catch the fleeting glimpse of a target passing over the pools of moonlight which mottled the stage area.

For the first time, Hatfield became aware of the bedlam of shouts outside the theater building. The roar of gunfire inside the Opera House had roused the town.

Then the Ranger started crawling forward in the direction he knew the Kiowa Killer was hiding. Indistinctly above the cacophony of shouts in the alley alongside the theater, he heard the strained breathing of his quarry.

The Kiowa Killer made a break for it then, leaping to his feet and sprinting across the center of the stage, avoiding the forest of ropes and standing scenery, steering clear of the patches of moonlight on the floor.

Jim Hatfield was in pursuit. Glass jangled as the Kiowa Killer stumbled over a footlight and sprawled headlong into the cobwebby gulf of the orchestra pit.

As the Ranger veered off to the left side of the stage and paused beside the gilded proscenium, he heard a jingle of metal down in the orchestra pit as the Kiowa Killer ejected spent cartridges from his six-guns.

Holstering one gun, Hatfield reached into his pocket and grabbed his jackknife. He hurled the Barlow toward the opposite end of the stage, heard it crash against the keyboard of a piano somewhere in the darkness.

Even as the discordant notes jangled out, the Kiowa Killer vaulted over the low railing which separated the orchestra pit from the ghostly auditorium and opened fire at the general direction of the piano, on the assumption that Hatfield was groping his way through the darkness at that side of the stage.

The ruse had worked. Spitting flame from the Kiowa Killer's six-guns gave the Texas Ranger the exact location of his quarry, crouched now at the lower end of the theater's center aisle. With cold precision, Jim Hatfield triggered his six-guns at the gun flashes, spacing a pattern of shots above and below and to each side of the flaming guns.

At such range, it seemed impossible that he could miss.

He was rewarded by a high-pitched scream of agony. At least one of his slugs had struck home.

"Drop yore guns, Kiowa Killer!" shouted the Ranger, peeping around the corner of the proscenium. "Get yore arms up and step out into the moonlight yonder!"

A choked oath, more the frenzied bawl of a wounded animal than a human sound, answered the Ranger's challenge.

Then, for a shaved fraction of an instant, Hatfield caught sight of the Kiowa Killer's sombreroed figure as the wounded outlaw darted through a patch of moonlight, sprinting up the aisle toward the front entrance of the Opera House. A bandanna mask hid the lower part of the man's face.

Hatfield had a dead bead on the escaping killer, and he pulled triggers in unison. Empty clicks of firing pins against spent shells greeted his ears. In the wild exchange of shots, the Ranger had emptied his Colts.

Reloading with desperate haste from his belt loops, Jim Hatfield made a running leap off the stage into the orchestra pit, then vaulted over a low velvet-draped railing onto the auditorium floor.

AHEAD of him through the gloom, he could hear the Kiowa Killer stumbling desperately toward the far end of the theater. Spatters of crimson where the moonlight struck the moldy carpeting of the center aisle was proof that the Ranger's bullets had struck their target. But how badly the killer was wounded, he could not tell.

A gun roared from under the peanut-gallery balcony as the wounded outlaw turned like a tiger at bay, shooting at Jim Hatfield as the Ranger sped up the aisle. The bullet thudded into a plush-covered

seat a dozen feet in front of the lawman.

Then, as the Texas Ranger zigzagged his way to the halfway mark up the aisle, he heard a squeak of door hinges as the Kiowa Killer swung open the street entrance of the Opera House, the door which Hatfield had checked and found locked earlier in the evening. The Kiowa Killer, then, had the keys of the long-abandoned theater in his possession and had gained entry to the Opera House from the front.

The gray light of approaching dawn silhouetted the Kiowa Killer as the wounded outlaw, crawling on hands and knees, dragged himself over the threshold and out on the porch which faced the main street.

Like a crippled spider, the Kiowa Killer's dark bulk hitched around to face the interior of the theater. Through the open doorway, Hatfield saw the mysterious masked killer struggling to lift a six-gun for the final shoot-out.

Even as the Ranger moved grimly forward behind jutting Colts, he saw the six-gun sag in the Kiowa Killer's hand.

At such close range, Hatfield could have shot the man dead. But he held his fire as the killer exhaled a long, choking sigh and then wilted in an inert heap, face down across the threshold of the theater entrance.

Hatfield leaped forward and snatched up the killer's smoking six-gun. He stepped over the motionless form, blinking his eyes against the glare of lanterns which Brasada's citizens were carrying up on the theater porch behind a bristling array of guns.

Panting heavily, the Texas Ranger stooped to pry a second Colt from the Kiowa Killer's hand. The outlaw's head and shoulders were dripping with yellow paint. Blood seeped from bullet holes in the killer's chest and abdomen, grim evidence of the unerring accuracy of the Lone Wolf's .45s.

"Who is he?"

It was Susan Reid's voice that broke the tense hush of the crowd gathering about the broken figure crumpled at the Texas Ranger's feet.

"The Kiowa Killer," Hatfield panted. "Don't be surprised when yuh see who he is. Yuh've all respected him as an honest citizen for a long time."

The Lone Wolf stooped to roll the Kiowa Killer over on his back, revealing the man's paint-spattered, blood-smeared visage for the first time.

"No—it's—it can't be!" choked Susan Reid. "You've made a horrible mistake!"

"I knew yuh'd be surprised and grieved," the Ranger said. "But there's the Kiowa Killer. He's Red Jack Skellet."

CHAPTER XX

Hatfield Explains

EVEN as the crowd stared in disbelief, they saw Brasada's locksmith and saddlemaker open the glittering blue eyes which had been hidden for so long behind a blind man's dark glasses. But there was nothing of blindness in the hate-poisoned glare which the dying outlaw shot up at the Ranger who had exposed his fiendish hoax.

"Yeah." Crimson bubbles frothed the corners of Skellet's mouth as the Ranger helped the bullet-riddled man into a sitting position, propped up against the theater door. "No use claimin'—yuh made a mistake, Hatfield. I'm the—Kiowa Killer."

Kneeling beside the wounded outlaw, Jim Hatfield turned to glance around at the faces of the crowd.

"Is Doc Brunton here?" the Ranger demanded. "No? Then somebody go fetch him. Although I got my doubts if a medico can help yuh out, Skellet. Yuh've got enough lead in yuh to kill a dozen, ordinary men."

The hostler from the livery stable scuttled off in the direction of the cowtown doctor's home. The crowd pressed in, still unable to believe that Brasada's year-long reign of terror had come to an end in the unmasking of this pitiful, blood-stained figure they had believed to be a blind man, incapable of filling the Kiowa Killer's rôle.

"Yuh're wonderin' about Skellet's eyesight," Hatfield remarked. "If my guess is correct, the New York surgeons restored yore sight on yore first trip back East, didn't they, Skellet? Yuh've masked that fact behind yore dark glasses all

these months, haven't yuh?"

Skellet nodded, a ghost of a grin flicking his lips.

"That's right," he confessed. "Nobody knew—I had a block of shares—in the Big Seven Syndicate. I figgered—I could kill off all the other stockholders—without bein' caught—or else scare 'em out of Brasada—with warnings I printed up. But how—did yuh—yuh didn't suspect me, did yuh, Hatfield?"

The Ranger's next words came as a surprise to the listening crowd.

"I'm afraid I caught onto yore secret, Skellet," he said, "after Injun Jim Buffalo told me yuh'd bought into the Big Seven, payin' ten thousand dollars cash for yore share. That sounded suspicious, when I knew that half that amount would pay for yore operation and restore yore eyesight.

"But I knew I was on the right track when yuh called me by name yesterday when I came out of the restaurant and yuh was standin' in the post office doorway. I was standin' there rollin' a cigarette, Skellet, makin' no sound at all, so yuh couldn't pretend to have recognized the jingle of my spurs or step. Yet, without me makin' a move, and with you standin' twenty feet distant, yuh knew I was there.

"That little slip proved to me yuh wasn't stone blind, as yuh pretended to be. And when yuh had me open that letter—a warnin' from the Kiowa Killer for you to leave town—it all fitted in. Yuh wanted to leave town, so yuh could get off the Amarillo stage-coach, rent yoreself a hoss and ride back to Brasada to kill me."

Red Jack Skellet shook his head slowly, wincing from the pain of his bullet-numbed body.

"I aimed—to keep workin' under cover—till all the stockholders was dead—and Brasada thought I was back in New York," Skellet admitted. "Then I'd come back to Texas—with my eyesight—and be plumb surprised to find—I was the sole survivin' stockholder and full owner of the—Big Seven."

HATFIELD saw the crowd shaking their heads, still unable. to believe the truth in the face of Skellet's confession.

"Let's go back to the beginnin'," Hatfield said to them. "Knowin' Skellet's motive for bein' the Kiowa Killer, knowin' he wasn't blind, it ain't hard to piece the puzzle together. Bein' an expert key-maker, Skellet had no trouble makin' keys which let him into the *Enterprise* office. Workin' in the dead of night, he set up type and made proofs on yellow cardboard of the Kiowa Killer's warnin's and boasts.

"He took the name Kiowa Killer—correct me if I'm wrong, Skellet—as a means of castin' suspicion on Injun Jim Buffalo, secretary of the syndicate, whose mother was a member of the Kiowa tribe. Bein' a friend and confidant of Sheriff Todd Kramer, it was easy for him to stab the sheriff in the back while the sheriff was playin' checkers, leavin' a card saying that he done this because Kramer had sent to the Texas Rangers for help."

"And Skellet found out you were that Ranger," Susan Reid interrupted, "when he slipped out into the rose garden the other night and eavesdropped on my conversation with you!"

Red Jack's nod confirmed the girl's statement.

"I was pretty shore Hatfield wasn't just a visitin' cowpoke, the minute I seen him come to the sheriff's office," Skellet boasted. "Another thing yuh didn't know, Susie—that I slipped some arsenic into Boojum Vozar's coffee that very evenin', when Booj came over to my place and asked if I wanted to go over to Kramer's house and give yuh my sympathies on yore granddad's death. That's why Boojum Vozar was a doomed man before he even got the bright idea of goin' into the jail and lockin' hisself up."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed, as another detail, puzzling at the time, now answered itself in the light of new facts.

"And yuh slipped that yellow card into Vozar's shirt pocket inside the jail cell, didn't yuh?" the Ranger asked. "I remember yuh was there before the coroner took Vozar's corpse away."

Skellet, his eyes bright with pain, nodded.

"Yuh almost trapped me that night in the hotel, Hatfield," the erstwhile "blind man" revealed. "When I'd written that warnin' on yore lamp chimney with a piece of beeswax I use to wax harness thread with. I didn't want to fire a shot

and attract attention when yuh bumped into me in the dark hall, but all the same I was lucky yuh didn't shoot me."

It was obvious that life was ebbing rapidly from the Kiowa Killer's body, and Hatfield hastened with his recital, wanting for his own satisfaction to have the dying man confirm his reconstruction of events.

"Skellet showed a certain devilish skill in throwin' suspicion on others," he said. "He used type from Harry Rockman's print shop for his yellow cards, somethin' which put Rockman under suspicion. And the night he killed Rockman, he set a clever stage to get Sam Wanda in bad. He left bits of type in Rockman's hand which spelled out Wanda's last name—somethin' I hadn't told yuh before now, Wanda."

Skellet leered up at the gaunt-faced saloonkeeper.

"I was in hopes—the Ranger would—take care of yuh—on yore way to El Paso, Sam," Skellet said, with a ghost of a chuckle. "But it seems—Ted Bonesteel telegraphed yuh—to come back and alibi yoreself. I figgered—yuh'd catch on—to those three chunks of type—I left in Rockman's fist, Hatfield."

The Ranger got to his feet, staring down at the figure of the Kiowa Killer.

"Skellet trailed me over to Injun Jim Buffalo's ranch and tried to bushwhack me the other day," Hatfield revealed for the first time. "If it hadn't been for a rattlesnake fixin' to strike me, I'd have tallied yuh then, Skellet. Yuh used a rifle that belonged to Jim Buffalo on that job. Every little clue yuh dropped pointed the finger of suspicion at some other stockholder of the Big Seven Syndicate."

JOSH FENTON spoke up from the crowd.

"What's all that yellow stuff on Skellet, Hatfield? It looks like paint."

Hatfield smiled without mirth.

"When I let the town know I aimed to defy the Kiowa Killer by spendin' the night in Room Thirteen," he said, "I knew Skellet could kill me only by shootin' or tossin' a dynamite stick into my window. That meant he had to work from one of the old dressin' rooms of the theater, so I set up buckets of paint to spoil his plans and identify him at the same time, in case he got out of the theater.'"

Red Jack Skellet groped in a pocket of his paint-spattered jumper and drew out an oblong cylindrical object. It was a stick of dynamite, to which was attached a short fuse. Tossed into Hatfield's bedroom, the bomb Skellet had improvised would have blown the Ranger to hash-meat.

"My original plan," Skellet informed the lawman, "was to ride back to Brasada after dark and visit yuh in yore hotel room. I didn't think—yuh'd suspect me. A knife would have done the trick. But when I found—the hotel guarded—so many people—I unlocked the Opery House with keys I'd made for the front door—and aimed to use that stick of dynamite—"

Red Jack Skellet closed his eyes, shuddering as if overcome with fatigue.

Sam Wanda cleared his throat.

"I reckon yuh're eligible for that five thousand reward I posted, Hatfield," the gambler said. "I'll pay off."

The Lone Wolf shook his head.

"Rangers don't accept bounty awards, Wanda," he said. "No, I'm leavin' Brasada today. My job's finished. And my boss, Cap'n Bill McDowell, has got more work for me to do."

Josh Fenton shook Hatfield's hand.

"This town can never thank yuh, Hatfield," he said. "Yuh've saved my life and the lives of the survivin' Big Seven owners. We'll never forget."

There was a commotion at the rear of the crowd, and in the red glare of the dawning sun, Doc Brunton appeared, clad only in a pair of pants and bedroom slippers. He was accompanied by the hostler, who carried his black instrument kit.

The crowd moved aside as the cowtown doctor squatted down beside Red Jack Skellet and took a stethoscope from his medical kit. Brunton hooked the instrument in his ears and listened briefly for the outlaw's breathing.

Finally he looked up at Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield.

"You called me a mite too late, son," the medico reported impersonally. "The Kiowa Killer is dead."

Next Issue: JIM HATFIELD in GUNS OF THE YELLOW HILLS

Suddenly Slat's guns were in his hands, one of them pointed at Henry and the other one covering the surprised youth

WOLF LITTER

By A. B. MacKENZIE

The kid was just a freckled youngster—but he was ready to fight like a man in order to avenge his dad's death!

THERE'S usually something funny about a boy who tries to behave like a grown man. But this time, there wasn't enough humor in the situation to call a grin out of any of the men who were grouped around the boy in front of Pete's General Store.

The kid was about fourteen, and the freckles stood out on his pale face. But his eyes were deadly, hating the man he faced.

"You killed my dad!"

The boy leaned forward on his toes, his hand hovering a couple of inches above

the worn butt of an old .44. His skinny length was quivering with fury, and the desire to kill. The man he faced watched him narrowly.

It wasn't very often that anyone got the drop on "Slats" Peterson. When a stranger was near, Slats kept his slim white hand near his gun butt, ready for the trouble that seemed to seek him out. But who would keep an eye on a fourteen-year-old kid? Young Rankin had called Slats, just as he had been yarning with some of the loafers in front of Pete's store, while Slat's hands were adjusting the gaudy handkerchief he wore around his neck.

"Look, kid," said Slats, slowly. "I didn't even know Dave was dead!" He kept his hands on his scarf. Any youngster of Dave Rankin's would be able to draw fast and shoot straight, and the break was too wide in favor of the youngster.

The kid's lip curled.

"Are you scared to make your break?"

"Well, yes, I am," said Slats, coolly. "I never figgered on gettin' killed for something I don't know nothin' about, and I don't figger on gettin' killed by no kid!"

Jimmy Rankin opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it without saying a word. He relaxed back on his heels, and then his eyes flicked helplessly to the men about him. In that second Slats moved. But he didn't go for his guns. One swift step took him to the kid, and a hard clout on the head laid the youngster out flat on the ground. Slats stooped, and picked up the youngster's gun. He waited calmly, the gun swinging casually from his finger by the trigger guard. Jimmy sat up, dazed.

"Now, get up," said Slats. "You and I will go over yonder and have a little talk. Hurry up. You're all right."

HE PRODDED the youngster with the .44, and the boy, after a venomous glare, did as he was told. The pair walked stiffly toward the corner, and none of the men offered to follow. Slats Peterson had a gun in his hand.

By the livery stable wall, Slats leaned over and picked up a sliver of stick. Hunkering down on his heels, he drew aimless pictures in the dust, while the Rankin boy watched. Finally the boy broke out:

"Well, what you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothin'", Slats admitted. "What can I do? I could gun you, I s'pose, but that wouldn't get us anywhere, you can see that. Now, you was tellin' me and the rest of them that I killed yore Dad. What about it?"

"Well, you did!"

"Matter of fact, I didn't. And I don't mind tellin' you that I'd be about the last man in the world to tangle with yore old man, too."

"That's what you say!" The sneer was back on the kid's face.

"That's what I say," agreed Slats, complacently. He eyed Jimmy suddenly. "Bounce Henry's been out around your way a lot lately, hasn't he?"

Jimmy scowled. "What's that got to do with it?" he asked.

"Don't know," said Slats. "Maybe a lot, maybe nothin'. Who else has been hangin' round?"

"Ain't any of yore business!" The kid's tone was flat and final.

Slats rose. "Okay, kid," he said. His teeth gleamed in a wolfish grin. "If that's the way you want it, that's the way it'll be. But I'm dealin' myself in. A man's got to get in a game, now and then, and it won't be long before you'll be fast enough to call me, and make me drill you, but you just try to get the drop on me the next few years. Here's yore gun."

Slats reached out the old .44 with his left hand, and his right hand rested on the butt of his own gun.

Slowly Jimmy reached for the gun, and carefully dropped it into its holster. The scowl never left his face, and his eyes never left Slats' right hand, lying lightly upon the gun butt.

"Now," said Slats. "I'm ridin' with you. We'll get back to that little spread of yours, and you'll ride first. I want to see where Dave Rankin died."

The kid turned on his heel, and led the way to the line of horses hitched before the Main Chance Saloon. He mounted his horse, a neat little roan pony, and watched somberly while Slats climbed on his own rangy black. Then he wheeled his horse and still slightly ahead of the other led the way out of town at a swinging gallop.

The Crowfoot range, owned by Dave Rankin, was a fine range. It lay in a wide valley near the foothills, and the ranch buildings were in the western end of the

range, half hidden by the hills behind. Buildings and corrals were in good repair, and Dave Rankin had managed to achieve a certain rude comfort for himself and his son and daughter. He had been a good rancher, breeding up his herd carefully. The outfit had been comfortably operated by Dave himself, with one regular rider, old Martin Peabody, who had been around ever since young Jimmy had put in his appearance, and with the ever-increasing help of Jimmy, who, at fourteen, was pretty well a top hand.

The ranch buildings were approached through a shallow draw, and it was part way up the draw that led to the corrals that Jimmy pulled up his horse.

"Here's where we found Dad." His tone was emotionless.

"Where?" Slats slid off his horse.

The kid pointed a finger. "We heard a shot. Seemed to come from up the bank, sort of. It was early this morning. When we got to him, he was dead."

Slats squinted up the hill, and looked carefully up the draw. "Any way of reaching the house from the top of the bank?"

The kid shook his head.

Slats thought for a moment. "All right, we'll go up to the house," he said.

THEY were met at the house by Doreen, Jimmy's kid sister, and a tall, burly rider who had been relaxing on the front step of the ranch house.

"Hello, Slats," called the big cowboy, as the youngster and Slats got off their horses. "Didn't expect to see you here!"

Slats showed his teeth. "Did you think a kid could do a job that you backed away from, Bounce?"

Bounce Henry reddened underneath his tan. "What are you talkin' about?"

Slats eyed him levelly. "If you don't know, I'm not tellin' you," he said. He looked down at the little girl. Two years younger than her brother, she was small and dark, with an elfin beauty that softened Slats' hard eyes as he greeted her.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," he said. "I'm real sorry about your Dad. I guess everyone that knew Dave will be sorry to hear he's gone."

Slats cleared his throat. "Now," he said, "there's somethin' that I'm kind of interested to know about. Have you located your Dad's will?"

"What's that got to do with you?" demanded Henry, truculently.

Slats grinned at him. "Why are you so interested?" He looked at the girl again. "I'm sure, Miss, that you haven't thought very much about it. But it's quite important. Do you know where it is?"

"No," said Doreen. "But I suppose it's in the big desk in the office. I'll go see."

"Don't bother," said Bounce Henry. He faced Slats. "It's none of yore business whether or not there is a will. Why don't you just fork yore horse and get out of here, Slats?"

"Are you figgerin' on makin' me?" Slats' voice was soft, and his grin wolfish.

"Sure, I am!" Henry hunched his shoulders.

Suddenly Slats' guns were in his hands. One of them was pointed at Henry's middle, and the other one was tilted toward the kid.

"You, kid!" His voice rasped. "Hold it!"

There was silence for a minute. Then young Jimmy's voice broke it. "Good grief," he said. "That was fast!" There was admiration in his voice.

But Slats' voice was hard. "Then let go of that gun of yours, and go and help your sister find that will. No—come over here and I'll take that iron. You're a little too anxious to use it. I'll look after it for a while. Now, git!"

Grinning at the motionless Henry, Slats slid one of the guns into his belt, and then replaced his own guns in their holsters.

"Now, feel like trying it out with me?" he said to Henry. "It took you a little while to get up enough nerve. Better shoot it out while you've still got a fair chance."

Henry shrugged his shoulders silently, though his face was contorted with dislike and fear.

They waited on the steps, facing one another, in silence, until the children returned. Doreen was waving a paper.

"It's Papa's will," she cried.

"Read it!" Slats was tense.

Jimmy, reading over her shoulder, cried out in surprise. "Dad leaves everything—to Slats Peterson!"

There was an oath from Henry.

Slats turned on him. "Want to read it for yourself?" he demanded.

Henry snatched the document from the

hands of the girl. His face was a picture of changing emotion. Unbelief, certainty, disgust, and anger chased each other across his features as he read. Then he looked at Slats and threw the will angrily to the porch.

"He must have been crazy," he said.

Slats was cool. "Now that you know, Henry, I'll remind you that you're on my property. I'm warnin' you this once, and then there'll be no more warnin'. Get off of the property and stay off!"

Henry stood still for a moment or so, and then stamped angrily to his horse. After he was in the saddle he wheeled around to the three on the porch.

"You'll hear more about this, Peterson. You can't get away with it. There's somethin' crooked about it."

HE PULLED his horse savagely around, and jabbed spurs cruelly into the animal, to make it bound down the draw that led away from the ranch buildings.

Slats turned to the two children. "Well," he said. "What do you think about it?"

Doreen spoke up quickly. "If Dad wanted it that way, then it's all right with us. Isn't it, Jimmy?"

Jimmy stood eying Slats balefully.

Suddenly Slats wheeled as he heard a step behind him. "Oh," he said, relaxing. "Howdy, Martin. Come on in and join the party. I'm just gettin' acquainted with my new responsibility."

Jimmy turned to old Peabody. "Accordin' to Dad's will," he burst out, "this feller is the new owner!"

Peabody was unperturbed. "You don't *say!*" he drawled. He turned to Slats. "Glad to have you with us!"

Jimmy was astonished. "Is that all you got to say?"

"What else is there to say?" He faced Slats, and hooked his hands in his belt. "What you aimin' to do with the outfit?"

"I guess I'll run it. You'll stick around, I s'pose?"

"Long as you pay me my wages, and the grub don't get too bad, I reckon so."

Slats turned to young Jimmy, with a grin. "And about you. I'll pay you top wages. From what I hear, you're worth it."

Jimmy straightened out his shoulders. "I don't know exactly what Dad had in mind when he willed this place to you," he said slowly. "I'll figure it out some day, maybe. In the meantime, what about Doreen?"

Slats glanced at the girl. "She'll be welcome wherever she goes. Would you like to stay here, Doreen?"

The girl smiled shyly at Slats. "I'd like to. But I'll do whatever Jimmy says."

Slats' cold eyes returned to the boy. "Well?"

"Okay. I guess there's nothing more to say about it!"

"That's fine, then. Martin and I will bed down temporarily in the bunkhouse. Anything else?"

"Well!" Martin cleared his throat. "I got everything ready, back there, for Dave."

Slats hesitated, and then said gruffly, "Well, let's get it over with."

It was a sad little group that formed around the rough grave that old Martin had dug. Slats watched coldly, while Jimmy held a protecting arm around Doreen, but Slats helped fill in the grave when the two children went back to the ranchhouse. When the job was finished, Martin drove the shovel into the fresh mound, and turned to Slats.

"I don't know what this is all about, Slats," he said. "To me it looks as if you've somehow or other managed to move in on what belongs to a couple of helpless kids. Maybe there's reason for it. I don't know. Dave Rankin told me a few days ago that you were takin' a hand in whatever deal came up, and that's all he said. But let me tell you this, mister! I'll be watchin' every move you make, so don't make any false moves!"

Slats grinned mirthlessly. "That makes two people I've got to watch, myself," he said. "That gun-loco kid of Dave's is waiting for another chance to gun me, and I suppose you'll do the same thing."

Old Martin shook his head. "I got nothing against you, personal," he explained. "I just want to see that those two kids get a square shake. I reckon they will from you, but if they don't, you got to answer to me. I know I'm not as fast with a gun as you are, so there'll be no chance for you to prove it. I'll just let you have it, in the back, if I need to."

Slats nodded. "Your sentiments do you

credit, even if it makes you sound a mite uncomfortable to have around." He laughed. "But if you wait to see, then—let's wait to see."

Work started early on the Crowfoot next morning, with the mystery of Dave Rankin's death still hanging over the ranch. Slats assigned work, which was accepted with calm by old Martin, and with a glower by Jimmy. Slats himself sauntered thoughtfully down the draw to the spot that had been the scene of Dave Rankin's death. He squinted up the hill on both sides of the trail, and suddenly stiffened. He watched for a long moment, and then the wolfish grin came briefly as he started back toward the ranch. Old Martin, and the boy, were at work at the corral, and Slats walked over idly.

YOUNG Jimmy straightened up from a lower rail that he was breathlessly pushing into place. "Aren't you goin' to do any work?" he demanded.

Slats grinned. "I've always found," he admitted, "that hard work makes it hard for me to deal a poker hand proper. And I like dealin' poker."

Jimmy bent and slid the rail savagely into place. "A loafin' boss," he said.

Slats curled a cigarette. "When you heard the shot that killed yore dad, where was everybody?" he asked.

Martin looked up. "Why?" he asked.

"Just wonderin' where everyone was," said Slats, casually. "For instance, where were you?"

"Martin was behind the barn," explained Jimmy. "He was sewin' a worn saddle. Me and Doreen was on the front steps, and Dad had just waved good-by. And Bounce Henry. I don't know where he was. He was around, though. He'd come in to say hello, and I figured he'd been lookin' for Martin after Dad left."

The conversation came to a close, as the noise of horses came up the trail.

When the cavalcade came riding into the ranch yard, it was evident that Bounce Henry had been to town. With him were the sheriff and some men.

The men dismounted, and the sheriff walked up to Slats. "Sorry about this, Slats," said he. "This is a court order appointin' Bounce the legal guardian of these kids. Got it made out early this morning. And I guess you'd better get ready to ride in with us. We want to ask you a few questions about that will Bounce told us about, and about where you was when Dave was killed."

Slats was cool. "I figgered somthin' like this was goin' to happen," he said. He turned to Bounce. "First you send a kid to do the job, and then you try to work it with the law." He eyed the burly cowboy. "Seems to me, each man should kill his own snakes."

Bounce Henry reddened again. "Blast you, Slats," he cried. "This time I'll—"

"Just a minute." Slats held out his hand. "Now that you've got the law here, let's get a few things figgered out. For instance, where were you when the shot that killed Dave Rankin was fired?"

Bounce was surprised. "Why," he said. "I don't know. Around here some place!"

Slats continued. "You might be interested to know why Dave Rankin willed his place to me. He rode into town a couple of weeks ago and told me he was goin' to do just that. Dave and I grew up together, sort of! When he got married, well, it was pretty certain that I'd never get married, cause we both wanted the same gal, sort of. So we agreed that I'd stick around, just in case I was ever needed. That all clear, Sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yes," he said, slowly. "I knew you and Dave was real thick at one time. But you had a sort of a fallin' out, didn't you, when Dave was married?"

"That's right!" Slats nodded. "It wasn't a fallin' out, though. I just didn't figger on bein' around too much, and I guess both Dave and Molly felt the same way. When Molly died, Dave asked me to come in and help with the ranch, and I was figgerin' on doin' it when I made a little money, enough to put in the same amount as I should have to make it even, though Dave said it didn't matter."

Slats eyed Bounce Henry hard. "Then, a couple of weeks ago, Dave rode into town. He told me that his cattle were goin' too fast for it to be natural, and he figgered some of his neighbors were swingin' a wide loop. He didn't know who to blame, but he made a few guesses. I was about to come in here, but I guess Dave found somethin' out, and was comin' in to see me. That's why somebody fixed him." Slats looked back at the sheriff.

"Now," he said. "Ask Henry to explain where he was when the shot that killed Dave Rankin was heard."

HENRY was as red as fire. "You lyin', killin' devil, you!" he shouted. "Are you sayin' that I killed Dave?"

The sheriff's face was cold. "Where was you, Bounce?"

"I was around the place," sputtered Henry. "I would not've killed Dave, I liked him. I know lots o' people don't like me, but Dave was a friend of mine."

"Where was you, Bounce?" the sheriff repeated.

Henry was silent for a minute. He turned to face the sheriff. "Rightly, I don't know. I was lookin' for Martin."

Slats' voice was cold. "You went down that trail, and you waited for Dave to come along, and you downed him, didn't you? Then you sneaked back into the ranch yard in the excitement, and you started passin' the word around that I was the feller who did the shootin'."

There was real fear in Henry's voice. "No! No, I was never near the trail. I was over on the other side of the yard all the time, I tell you. Look, Sheriff, he's guessin'!"

"I'll tell you where he was." It was old Peabody who spoke up. "I saw him!"

Slats looked at old Martin. "Where did you see him?"

"I saw him come past the corrals. I never thought of it, somehow, until now. He could have come up the trail, and then sneaked down past the corrals as if he was in the yard all the time."

"When did you see him, Martin?"

"Just a little bit after we heard the shot."

"Where did you see him from?" asked Slats again, in the same cold tone.

"Why, why—I saw him from—from the front porch, where the kids was."

Slats' gun came out of his holster, covering Peabody. "Jimmy," he said. "Who got to your kids first, Martin, or Bounce?"

Jimmy's face was white. "It was—it was—Bounce Henry!"

"Don't do it, Martin!" Slats' voice cracked like a whip! "Sheriff, send one of your men up to the point of the loft, and find Peabody's rifle. It'll be there."

Old Martin's face was haggard. There was a dazed look on Henry's face, the look of a man who sees danger passed. The group stood in silence, until a hail was heard from the loft peak.

"Here it is!"

The sheriff silently went over to old Martin, and lifted the gun from his belt. Martin stood silently, like a wooden man.

Slats' voice broke the silence. "I never did figger that Henry had it in him to do any killin'," he said. "And I don't think Dave would have been killed that way. But the trail curves down past the front end of the place, and on foot you can even see the barn over the hill. But you could shoot a man on horseback from the barn peak, all the same. Trouble was, Peabody was covered. He was supposed to have been mendin' a saddle. Now that kind of work is always done right beside the door of the barn, and Martin wouldn't have been able to see anybody past the corral. But he saw a chance to hang the killin' on somebody else. When he said he saw Bounce, I knew he was lyin'."

Bounce Henry heaved a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Slats, about the way I figgered you'd done it, but Dave had mentioned a couple of times that you could be figgered on any deal that came up, and I thought he meant you'd threatened him."

"What about that court order?"

Bounce said, "Oh, that! We'll tear it up. I reckoned that we'd need that to get you away from here, but you won't be going away from here, now, will you?"

The grin came back to Slats' face.

"That depends on my boss."

He turned to Jimmy. "What about it? Do I stay here?"

Jimmy looked at him for a full minute. "Well, it's your ranch, ain't it?"

Slats was still grinning. "Not now, it ain't! I got another will in my pocket that's dated after the one you found yesterday. Dave trusted me, you see. He figured that if anything happened to him, if I was the next owner, the killer would be smoked out. And when he was I had to produce the new will, givin' the ranch to the people it belongs to—you and Doreen. Here it is! Now, I'm out of a job. Do you want a top hand?"

Jimmy looked at Slats, his eyes dancing. "Sure, you're hired," he declared. "That is, if you figger you can take the chance of teachin' me how to draw as fast as you do!"

The identity of this hunted outlaw was a mystery of the range, but Dick Saugus had his own idea!

GUNS AGAINST EL GATO

By MELVIN GABLE

DICK SAUGUS' lean, six-foot figure was slack in the saddle as he jogged his pinto across the range. It had been a long, tedious trip from Lordsburg, and his high cheeked, bony face, edged with its stubble of beard, reflected his weariness.

He squinted his pale eyes against the cloudless New Mexico sky. From the position of the sun, and the distance of the pinon covered slopes at his back, he judged several hours had elapsed since breaking camp that morning. If his calculations were correct, Mesilla should be no more than five miles away.

His hand moved up to the stray lock of blond hair that dangled over his right eyebrow, sweeping it back beneath the brim of his dust-laden Stetson.

Abruptly Saugus snapped erect in the saddle, reining the pinto to a quick halt. To his right, half a dozen large, rough-edged granite boulders were strewn about in a semi-circular fashion. In their midst, a man, naked to the waist, lay spread-eagled on the ground, his wrists and

ankles lashed firmly to crude wooden stakes.

Sweat glistened on the man's bare chest which was already unnaturally red in spots from over exposure to the sun, oddly matching the color of his rumpled hair.

Saugus swung down to the ground, removing the canteen which dangled from the pommel of his saddle. Unscrewing the cover, he knelt by the redhead's side, giving him a few swallows. The man sucked the water in greedily, then ran his tongue over his cracked, swollen lips.

"Thanks," he murmured hoarsely.

SAUGUS took out his Bowie knife and severed the rawhide thongs with its keen blade. The redhead sat up stiffly, began rubbing the ugly red welts on his wrists and ankles.

"Mebbe you'd better light outa here. If the hombres who did this to me catch yuh here they won't take kindly to it," he said.

"Let me worry about that. Who did this?" Saugus queried.

"A couple of El Gato's men."

Saugus frowned. "El Gato the outlaw? He's never been known to operate in New Mexico Territory. Texas is his stamping grounds."

"Then things must have got too hot for him there because he's sure enough in New Mexico now," the redhead rejoined.

"Gilman's my name. Rod Gilman," he continued. "I was riding north to take a job with John Chisum's outfit. Last night I stopped over in Mesilla and got into a poker game at the cantina. Reckon I did pretty well, won close to five thousand, but by the time the game broke up it was too late to ride on, so I put up at the hotel."

He paused long enough to take another drink from Saugus' canteen.

"Just before sunup this morning I woke up to find a couple of tough looking gents with guns standing over my bed. They took the dinero I had won and made me ride out here with them. El Gato, their boss, was waiting here."

"Did you get a look at his face?" Saugus broke in.

"*Nada.* He was masked. He dressed like a Mexican, black sombrero, dark velvet jacket with silver buttons and pants to match. Spoke Spanish, too, but I know he's an American. He had his men stake me out and stood by grinning like a devil while they did it."

"Seems odd he should take all that trouble if robbery was all he wanted," Saugus commented.

Gilman shrugged. "I can't figure that either unless he did it out of sheer meanness. Before they rode off and left me I heard him tell the two hombres that brought me here to ride back at noon and finish me off with a bullet."

"If El Gato's in these parts he must have a hideout in or around Mesilla," Saugus said. "The nearest American peace officer is over in Lordsburg and he seldom drifts down this far. The only law in Mesilla is the Alcalde, and they say any man on the dodge is welcome there as long as he greases the Alcalde's fat palm."

He broke off, listening attentively. Hoofbeats drummed along the trail. A pair of fast riding horsemen emerged from the haze of dust in the distance.

"That must be El Gato's men now!" Gilman cried.

He started to get up. Saugus placed a hand against his chest and held him back.

"Stay put. I'll handle this. Lie back as if yuh were still tied to the stakes."

Gilman stared up at him uncertainly for a moment, then sank back to the ground, resuming the same position he had been in when Saugus found him. Saugus led his pinto around behind the boulders where it could not be observed from the trail.

Crouching low behind one of the smaller boulders, Saugus slipped out his Colt. The two riders thundered up, drawing reins close beside Gilman's outstretched figure. Saugus took off his Stetson, peered cautiously over the rim of the boulder.

THEY were a hard looking pair of gunhawks, with beefy, sweatstained faces showing beneath the brims of their Mexican sombreros. One of them rested his hands on his hips, gazing down at Gilman sneeringly. .

"Jest look at him, Callum. He don't seem to have as much to say now as he did this morning. El Gato was right when he claimed a few hours in the sun would take the cockiness out of him."

Callum grinned, exposing yellowish buck teeth.

"Reminds me more of a broiled lobster," he commented.

His companion chuckled, brought out his six-gun with a wide flourish of his hand.

"Bet yuh a silver dollar I shoot his eye out first shot."

Saugus stood up as the gunhawk raised the barrel of his gun. The Colt in Saugus' hand trained on the gunhawk's chest.

"Ten against your one yuh don't even touch him," Saugus drawled.

Startled, the outlaw twisted about in the saddle, swiveling his gun in Saugus' direction. Saugus triggered his Colt, drilling him squarely through the chest. The outlaw slumped forward, pitching headlong to the ground.

Callum reared his horse about, dug in the spurs and went galloping across the sage. Saugus scrambled over the boulder, but held his fire. Rod Gilman sprang to his feet.

"We won't learn anything from this hombre, he's beyond the talking stage," he said regretfully.

Saugus holstered his gun.

"You can take his horse. I've got a spare shirt in my saddlebag you're welcome to. Now there's nothing to stop yuh from taking that job with Chisum's outfit."

"There's still the matter of five thousand dollars El Gato took from me. I'm heading back to Mesilla," Gilman said doggedly. "Mebbe I'll run into Callum again. This time we'll be on an even footing."

Saugus shrugged. "Suit yorself. Better see a doctor and have him give you something for your chest. That sunburn will be mighty painful in a few hours."

"I will. Thanks for all you've done for me, Mr.—"

"Saugus. Dick Saugus. I'm heading for Mesilla too, so I'll ride along with you if yuh don't mind."

"Suits me fine."

"I'm looking for a gent there by the name of Ashton Webb."

Gilman frowned. "Webb? Sounds familiar. There was an hombre in our poker game at the Cantina by that name, a good looking young fellow with blue eyes."

Saugus' pale eyes flickered with interest.

"That's him."

He gave a low whistle that brought his pinto trotting out from behind the boulders. Saugus gave it an affectionate pat before swinging up into the saddle. Gilman mounted the dead outlaw's horse and they struck out along the trail for Mesilla.

FEW people were about on Mesilla's sun-baked main street when Saugus and Rod Gilman rode into the town. The majority were Mexicans, wearing the inevitable serape and sombrero. There was nothing pretentious about the place. Most of the buildings were of 'dobe, dirty and weatherbeaten.

When they came abreast of the cantina, Saugus drew rein.

"I'll be leaving you here, Gilman. Mebbe I'll see yuh later in the day if you're still around."

"Bueno. I'll see the doc like you said, then I'll pay the Alcalde a visit and see if he knows anything about El Gato. Adios."

He lifted a hand in farewell, then rode off. Saugus glanced about. There was a livery stable directly opposite the cantina. He left his pinto there, giving the Mexican hostler instructions to give the animal a rub down and feed, then crossed over to the cantina.

It was a drab, ill smelling place, but pleasingly cool after the stifling heat of the street. There was little activity inside the cantina at this hour. The bar was deserted save for a florid faced barkeep wiping glasses.

Of the many tables lined against the far wall, only one was occupied. Two men and a dark haired senorita sat there. Saugus walked towards them.

One of the men was a Mexican. The finery of his white silk shirt, fancy gold braided jacket and scarlet waist sash seemed strangely out of place in those surroundings. His face was strongly chiseled, with a heavy black mustache providing a sharp contrast to his iron-gray hair.

His companion, an American, turned his head in Saugus' direction. It was Ash Webb. He hadn't changed much since the last time Saugus had seen him, three years ago. He was as handsome as ever, with the same infectious grin on his face, and eyes that were as bright as those of a mischievous puppy.

"Well, if it isn't Dick Saugus," Ash

greeted affably. "What the blazes are you doing in Mesilla? Last I heard you were up in Lincoln County mixing it in that range war."

Saugus strode over. "Howdy, Ash. That fracas in Lincoln County broke up last month so I drifted back to Lordsburg to look up yore dad."

Ash indicated his two companions with a sweep of his hand.

"I'd like you to meet a couple of friends of mine. Senorita Rosita Morales and Senor Ramon Flores, the Alcalde of Mesilla."

Saugus doffed his Stetson to the raven-haired Rosita. Her shining eyes held a quality as beautiful as her olive-tinted face. Senor Flores pushed back his chair and rose with an effortless grace.

"A pleasure, Senor Saugus." His eyes probed Saugus' face intently. "Doubtless the two of you have much to talk over, so I will take my departure," he said graciously.

His bootheels rang hollowly on the floor as he strode out. Saugus seated himself in the chair the Alcalde had vacated. He found that Ash was regarding him quizzically.

"I think I know why you're here, and I'm telling you that it's a waste of time," Ash said.

"I've come to take you back to Lordsburg," Saugus said bluntly.

THE other grinned somewhat cynically.

"And if I don't choose to go?"

"You're making it hard on me, Ash. Yore father told me all about it, how he sent yuh to Frisco for the past two months, hoping you'd get rid of that wild streak of yores there. Looks like it was just wistful thinking. You'll never lose that wild streak."

"The first night back in Lordsburg I got in a gunfight and killed a man," Ash said. "It was a fair fight, but the coroner's jury ordered me held for trial. That's why I jumped bail and hightailed it down here. They were trying to railroad me into a hangnoose."

"If you don't show up at that trial, Ash, they'll make an outlaw out of you," Saugus remarked. "Yore trial doesn't come up until Monday morning. We could make it back there in plenty of time if we leave here first thing tomorrow."

"They wouldn't give me a fair show," Ash complained. "Dad's mayor of Lordsburg and he has a lot of enemies. They've been waiting for a chance to get him out of office and this is it. They'll frame me into a murder rap and force him to resign in order to save my neck."

"I'll see to it yuh get a square deal, and that they don't ring any lying witnesses in on you," Saugus promised.

"Why are you mixing in this?" Ash queried.

"Because of yore dad. He's too fine a man to be hurt by you or anyone else."

"You think a lot of him."

"He took me in when I was a range orphan and brought me up as if I were his own son. I know you always resented that. I reckon that's the reason I left to strike out on my own as soon as I felt I was old enough. I rode back a few days ago, Ash. Yore dad told me what had happened and asked me to fetch you back. That was little enough for me to do after all he did for me."

"Maybe I will go back with you. I'll have to think about it," Ash decided.

"Fair enough," Saugus said, getting up. "Rosita, maybe you can help him make up his mind to come back with me."

Her dark eyes regarded Saugus frankly.

"If I were to discuss the matter with him, I would try to persuade him to remain here. You see, I am in love with him, and I would not favor any decision that would take him away from me."

"In that case I hope you don't discuss it with him," Saugus said wryly. "See yuh later, Ash."

Saugus strode out, and crossed over to the livery stable. There was no sign of the Mexican hostler when he entered. The air was heavy with the odor of horses and hay. He could hear the impatient stamping of hoofs from the many stalls lining the dimly lit interior.

He walked slowly up the line, looking briefly in each one for his pinto. Finally he found him in the last stall at the far end of the stable. He was reaching for the bar to swing open the gate when he detected a rustle behind him.

Thinking it was the attendant returning, he started to swing slowly about. He caught a brief glimpse of a beefy, pock-marked face which he recognized as

Callum's, before a gun barrel swung down viciously on his head. Then everything blacked out.

A DULL, persistent throbbing in his head was the first thing Saugus felt when he awakened. He sat up slowly, noted that he had been lying on a pile of hay. Evidently Callum had not tried to kill him, otherwise he would have done a more thorough job of it. The beating was undoubtedly intended to serve as a warning for Saugus to clear out of Mesilla.

Saugus rose unsteadily to his feet. There was a water trough just outside the stall. He staggered over it, dousing his head in the tepid water. It eased the throbbing and cleared his mind.

When he straightened up, water dripped from his rumpled blond hair and streamed down his face. He used his bandanna to wipe it dry.

"Quien es?" The sharply put query caused him to whirl about, but he relaxed when he saw it was only the Mexican hostler.

"I came in here to fetch my pinto a while back and someone hit me on the head," Saugus explained. "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, senor."

Saugus emitted a low whistle. It had been around three in the afternoon when he had left the cantina. Now it was evening. He brushed away wisps of straw that clung to his clothes, then retrieved his Stetson, pulling it on gingerly.

"Has the senor heard the news about El Gato?" the Mexican asked, his eyes burning with excitement.

"What news?"

"Only two hours ago El Gato and his men held up the the stage from La Mesa. They killed the driver and escaped with the strong box. Even now a posse scours the hills for him. The Alcalde has arrested a gringo, the one who was robbed by El Gato this morning."

"Why did the Alcalde arrest him?"

"As a material witness, so he can identify El Gato when the posse brings him in."

Saugus flipped the Mexican a silver dollar.

"Gracias for the information."

He left the man standing there and strode out. It was already dark. The feeble rays of the street lamps sought vainly to dispel the shadows.

Saugus noted that a Baille was in progress in the cantina. The gay strains of a native Mexican dance coupled with high-pitched laughter reached his ears. All the hitchracks were in use and the street was lined with parked buckboards.

The knowledge that Rod Gilman was locked up proved disturbing to Saugus. He knew the cowboy had no other friends in Mesilla. Therefore Saugus felt it his duty to try and help him.

He inquired the whereabouts of the Alcalde's office from a passerby and was informed it lay several blocks away, towards the outskirts of town. The crowd thinned out noticeably as he proceeded along the walk. The street grew darker and the 'dobe buildings dingier.

A nighthawk voiced its shrill cry from somewhere in the sky. Saugus felt suddenly uneasy, sensing impending trouble. A few doors ahead he saw the Alcalde's office.

A street lamp, the only one on that block, stood at the edge of the walk. A pair of horses were tethered to the hitchrack alongside it.

As he started for the doorway, three staccato shots blasted out from inside. A moment later the front door burst open, sending a jagged patch of light streaking across the walk, outlining Saugus in the glare.

Saugus whipped out his Colt and dove for the shadows by the edge of the building. He twisted about and dropped to his knees behind a rain barrel in time to see two men bound through the doorway of the Alcalde's office and race for the horses at the hitchrack.

ONE of the two running men was dressed completely in black, from his high peaked sombrero to velvet jacket and pants. El Gato! Saugus guessed his identity instantly.

El Gato vaulted the hitchrack and swung lithely into the saddle. His companion broke his stride, wheeled about and fired towards Saugus' crouched figure. The winking flashes of gunfire cast a reddish glow across the gunman's face, revealing in perfect clarity every blemish on his pockmarked countenance. It was Callum.

Saugus leveled his Colt and pulled the trigger. He saw Callum stagger and pitch loosely to the walk. Saugus sprang to his feet. El Gato dug in his spurs. Hunched low in the saddle he thundered up the street, kicking up a cloud of swirling dust.

Saugus crossed cautiously to Callum's side. One brief look was enough to satisfy him the outlaw was dead. He looked up again. El Gato had already disappeared from view. Saugus hurried into the Alcalde's office.

Ramon Flores, the Alcalde, was standing by his desk. His face bore a strained, anxious look, his eyes narrowing slightly as he beheld Saugus.

"What of El Gato, did he get away?" he asked quickly.

"He did, but his compadre Callum won't be going anywhere," Saugus returned coldly. "What happened in here?"

Flores pointed to the open cell door at the rear of his office. A body lay sprawled on the floor. Saugus crossed over, stared down at Rod Gilman's pallid face. Gilman still wore the blue cotton shirt Saugus had given him that morning. It was splotched with blood across the chest.

Saugus swung about, found that Flores was watching him intently.

"Who did it?" Saugus' voice was harsh.

"El Gato. There was a knock at the door and I opened it thinking it was my deputy returned from supper. Instead it was El Gato and Callum. They forced me to unlock the cell door, told Gilman to come out, then shot him. I was helpless to do anything," Flores said vehemently.

"I won't buy that," Saugus grated. "I think you and El Gato had this all framed between yuh, that you purposely had Gilman locked up at his say so El Gato could get at him without any trouble."

Color deepened the Alcalde's cheeks.

"A lie," he protested. His lips tightened, drawing his mustache into a thin straight line.

"Is it?" Saugus persisted. "I've heard stories about you, Flores. They say Mesilla is a haven for any outlaw as long as he pays you off. I think that's why El Gato chose this place as a hideout, because he knew he'd be safe around here."

The Alcalde was regaining his composure. He forced a mocking grin.

"You are very clever, senor. You forget one thing. I am the law here. If you do not like the way I run Mesilla I suggest you vamos from here by sunrise. If I find you here after then I'll have you locked up on whatever charge suits my fancy. I do not think you'll find my jail a healthy place to be in. *Sabe usted?*"

Saugus itched to wipe the grin off the Alcalde's face with his fist, but he kept his temper in check.

"Sure, I'm a smart hombre, Flores. I catch on quick."

"Bueno. Then I suggest you leave my office pronto. In the meantime I'll arrange to have this poor fellow's body sent over to the undertaker's."

His grin widened. Saugus' fists clenched and unclenched at his sides but he said nothing. Instead he turned on his heel and strode out.

THE Baille was still in full swing when Saugus returned to the cantina. He had to push to get through the gay, boisterous crowd that jammed the entrance. He made his way past the bar to the line of tables where he spotted Ash Webb and Rosita sitting close to the orchestra dais.

Rosita gave him a glance of annoyance as he dropped uninvited into an empty chair at their table. He regarded Ash closely.

"Make up yore mind yet?"

Ash nodded slowly. "I reckon I'll be going back with you in the morning."

"I'm glad." Saugus' face grew grim. "After I get you straightened out in Lordsburg, I'll be drifting back here. I've a score to settle with a couple of gents. El Gato and the Alcalde."

Ash frowned. "I heard about El Gato holding up the La Mesa stage. How did you get mixed up with him?"

"Had a little shooting scrape with him at the Alcalde's office about half an hour ago. He killed Rod Gilman."

"Gilman? He that cowboy that cleaned us all out at the poker game last night?"

"That's him. I've a hunch El Gato is in cahoots with the Alcalde. Flores threatened to lock me up if he caught me in Mesilla after sunrise."

"Don't tell me you are afraid of him?" Rosita taunted, and Saugus saw amusement in her glance.

"*Nada.* But the important thing now is

to get Ash back to Lordsburg. Where'll I meet you, Ash?"

"You'd better clear the town by sunrise, like Flores said," Ash advised. "There's an old line shack off the right fork about five miles north of town. Suppose you meet me there, say about an hour after dawn."

Saugus nodded. "*'Sta bueno.*"

Rosita looked across at Ash. Worry showed in her dark eyes.

"I wish you weren't going back to Lordsburg. I'm afraid something will happen to you there."

Ash grinned reassuringly, took her by the hand.

"Don't worry, chiquita. Nothing's going to happen to me. Come on, let's dance. This is our last night together and there's no sense wasting it."

He got up, pulled back her chair, and led her out onto the dance floor as the orchestra struck up another lively tune.

The eastern horizon was a streak of brilliant scarlet when Saugus urged his pinto off the main road onto the right fork. The drab gray mist clinging low to the sage vanished quickly as the sun rose, revealing a landscape dotted with yuccas in bloom, and stately looking cactus.

The peace and beauty of the vista made the possibility of danger seem highly remote, and the sharp crack of the Winchester was completely unexpected.

Saugus felt his Stetson jerk from his head. Instinctively he whipped out his Colt and flung himself clear of the saddle, landing flat on the hard packed earth. He lay there unmoving, face down.

Two horsemen emerged from behind a not too distant rise. Saugus kept his eyes open, watching them jog warily towards him. There was no mistaking the rider in the foreground. His black outfit pegged him instantly as El Gato. A tight fitting black mask covered the upper part of his face. He held a Winchester poised in his hand.

A few feet behind him was Ramon Flores, the Alcalde. Saugus' grip on his Colt tightened. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead, and his breath came quickly. El Gato reined up a scant ten feet from him and started to dismount.

This was it. Saugus told himself. Now! He raised himself on his left elbow and flipped up the muzzle of his Colt. El Gato saw the movement, hastily settled back in the saddle and brought up his Winchester.

Saugus triggered his Colt. The roar was deafening, so close to his ear. El Gato loosened his grip on the Winchester and clutched his bloody left shoulder. His horse reared up with a shrill neigh.

FLORES had his long-barreled pistol out. It spouted flame. Saugus rolled over. Bullets kicked up dirt inches away from his face. Saugus fired from his prone position. Acrid, swirling gunsmoke partially obscured his vision. Through the haze he saw Flores tumble out of the saddle.

El Gato reined his horse about and spurred past the Alcalde's sprawled body. Saugus sprang to his feet in time to see El Gato swing around the rise and vanish from sight.

Saugus raced for his pinto, leaped into leather and tore in pursuit. He reined up beyond the rise. It would be futile to continue the chase, not knowing which of a dozen different trails El Gato had taken. Reluctantly Saugus pulled about and swung back to the right fork.

He followed it for about a quarter of a mile before he spotted the line shack Ash had mentioned. As he approached he saw another rider pull up in front of it. At first he thought it might be Ash, but as the rider dismounted he caught the swirl of a skirt and could see a woman's hair beneath the hat brim.

He was too far from her to discern her features, but he guessed it was Rosita. She had already entered the shack by the time he rode up and tethered his pinto to the hitchrack.

The door was open. He walked in cautiously. The interior was dimly illuminated by a single sputtering candle set in a tin holder on a table by which Rosita was standing. A defiant look settled over her olive tinted face at sight of Saugus.

He looked past her at Ash, who was leaning against the flagstone fireplace. Ash's handsome face appeared unusually pale in the flickering candle light. He forced a wry grin.

"Howdy, Saugus. What was all that shooting I heard?"

Saugus shifted his gaze back to Rosita.

"I had another run in with El Gato. He and the Alcalde tried to drygulch me. Someone must have tipped them off that I'd be coming along that road. Any idea who it was, Rosita?"

Her sensuous lips framed a sneer, but she offered no comment.

"You were at the cantina last night when Ash and I decided to meet here. My guess is that you told the Alcalde about it because yuh knew he was gunning for me and yuh didn't want me to take Ash back to Lordsburg."

"It's true I wanted Ash to remain in Mesilla, that's why I'm here now to try and talk him into staying," Rosita said angrily. "But you're wrong about my telling the Alcalde anything."

She turned her head towards Ash, an eloquent look in the depths of her dark eyes.

"Please stay, for my sake. Why chance getting the hangnoose by going back with Saugus?"

Ash wavered a trifle unsteadily on his feet. Saugus regarded him more closely, saw a grimace of pain sweep over his face. For the first time since entering, Saugus noticed that Ash's left arm hung limply at his side. Even as he watched he saw a thin trickle of blood drip from the man's sleeve and make dark splotches on the floor.

Ash observed Saugus' gaze fixed on his arm and he smiled thinly. His right hand flicked upward, training his six-gun on a line with Saugus' chest.

"Don't move, Saugus, or I'll drill you dead center," he rasped.

Saugus stiffened, raised his hands slowly. He heard a startled gasp from Rosita.

"You—El Gato!" Saugus exclaimed.

Rosita stared at Ash uncomprehendingly.

"Ash, he's joking," she said, her voice strained. "You're not El Gato, not a thief and a murderer."

ASH lurched away from the fireplace, stood wavering on his feet. The grin remained frozen on his face.

"Sure I'm El Gato. If you don't believe me, just look in the fireplace where I ditched my black outfit when I rode in here a few minutes back. You winged me back there on the trail, Saugus. You always were handy with a shooting iron."

"Why, Ash? What made you do it?" Saugus asked.

"You always said I had a wild streak in me. Things got too dull to suit me. The past two months when dad thought I was away in Frisco I was down in Texas. That's when I first became El Gato. I did all right at it until the Rangers began getting too close on my trail. Then I high-tailed it back to Lordsburg."

"Then that gunfight yuh got into on yore first night back didn't happen the way you claimed," Saugus said.

"You catch on quick. I forced that fight so it would give me an excuse to leave there for good. I was anxious to become El Gato again. I drifted down here to Mesilla knowing it would be a safe hideout. What I didn't count on was dad sending you to fetch me back."

"What about Rod Gilman, why did yuh have to kill him?"

"He cleaned me out in the poker game and I didn't like the way he joked about it. I thought I'd get even in my own way by staking him out. When you spoiled that it made me want to get him even more. That's why I had Flores jail him. I tried scaring you out of town by having Callum slug you in the livery stable. I should have known you didn't scare easy."

"Then it was you who framed that ambush this morning."

"Only it didn't come off the way I planned," Ash said ruefully. "But it'll work out my way now. I'm pulling out of here, Rosita, heading for Mexico. I want you to come with me."

"I wouldn't go anywhere with you now."

Saugus was surprised at the determination in her voice.

Ash frowned. "Why not? You just got through telling me how much you loved me."

"I was in love with Ash Webb, not El Gato the killer."

Anger flamed in Ash's blue eyes.

"I'm not going to beg you," he snarled. "Saugus, you've been running in luck ever since you hit Mesilla. It's played out now."

Rosita's hand swept out suddenly, striking the candle off the table and plunging the room into darkness. Saugus threw himself to the floor, dragging at his Colt.

Orange flame mushroomed from Ash's six-gun. Saugus twisted to his knees, fired by instinct rather than aim.

The door to the shack was booted open and Ash backed over the threshold, still pumping lead. Saugus sent another shot just above the flash of Ash's gun. Ash sagged against the doorjamb. His gun hit the floor with a metallic thud. He slid limply to his knees and pitched into the open.

Saugus moved slowly across the room, stepped outside. He stood above Ash's body, his face drawn in tired lines. Rosita appeared in the doorway, sobbing softly. Saugus shoved his gun back into its holster. Ash had no need for his any more, either.

"It's not going to be an easy job to face his father when I bring him back to Lordsburg," Saugus said heavily.

"It will be a shock to his padre when he learns Ash was El Gato," Rosita said.

Saugus shook his head slowly.

"He's never going to know that. It would kill him. I'll merely tell him that Ash was killed by El Gato, which in a certain sense is true. There was good in Ash, and a bad streak too. The bad in him was El Gato and that's what destroyed him. You know what really happened here. It all depends on whether or not you'll tell a different story than mine."

"You need not worry. His padre has suffered enough already without learning the truth. I will keep your secret. That's the least I can do for Ash."

"You're a good girl, Rosita. I had yuh pegged wrong."

She looked at him through tear-filled eyes.

"When I first saw you I thought you were a hard and brutal man. I was wrong too. You have a great heart."

Saugus knelt down, lifted Ash gently in his arms, draped him across the saddle of his horse. There was no reason to postpone the ride to Lordsburg. This would be the toughest and most distasteful job he ever had to perform, bringing Ash Webb home to his father. The sooner he got it over with the better.

When the Ranchers of Texas Are Haunted by the Threat of Sudden Death and Tragedy, the Lone Wolf Ranger Rides in to Pit Himself Against a Villainous Crew! Follow Jim Hatfield as He Makes a Six-gun Sweep of Range Despoilers

IN

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"Stay close!" Norbec yelled. "If we drift apart we'll never find each other."

THE BLIZZARD TRAITOR

By GUNNISON STEELE

In a blinding snowstorm, Sheriff Bill Norbec must pursue and capture his best friend—a man marked as an owlhoot!

SHERIFF BILL NORBEC, a tall, powerful man with aquiline features and smoky brown eyes, crouched at the edge of the snow-shrouded lodgepole thicket and stared at the log cabin in the small clearing before him. The cabin huddled in the lee of towering walls where it was sheltered from the savage wind. Smoke curled from its mud chimney.

Norbec grimaced, shifting his cold-numbed legs. He was pretty sure that "Reno" Deming was inside that cabin. Reno Deming, the best friend he'd ever had—and the man he had to take out to begin a life sentence at Deer Lodge.

The sheriff wriggled backward, deeper into the thicket, and slowly got to his feet. At his back was a timbered slope, the tree branches, sheathed in ice and snow, crackling and popping in the bitter wind. Vapory snow streamed off the rocky crest of the ridge and from the top of the walls. The wind blew shrill and trumpetlike.

The snow had stopped two days before and lay two feet deep on the frozen earth. But the sky remained sullen and gray, with a darker cloud mass shifting restlessly about the white, cathedral-like peaks to the north. A fresh blizzard was on the way, Bill Norbec knew, and would strike in all its fury within hours.

He started moving ghostlike through the thicket. On one side of the cabin the thicket marched right up to the walls. Moments later, Norbec crouched there against the cabin wall. He could hear no sound inside the cabin. But now he knew he had guessed right, for twenty yards away, in a brush corral under an overhanging wall, was the shaggy buckskin pony Reno Deming had stolen in his break from the Antlers jail.

Norbec started easing along the wall. There was bitter regret in his heart for what he had to do, but no indecision. Maybe he would turn in his badge after this was done, but not before. He reached the front of the windowless cabin and paused before the closed door. Maybe the door was latched on the inside; maybe not. It was a chance he had to take.

He unbuttoned his sheepskin and drew his gun. Gripping the door knob he twisted, smashed his shoulder against the door. The door slammed inward. Norbec leaped through, into a warm room that was dimly lighted by a lantern on a table.

RENO DEMING had been sitting beside the table, thumbing through an ancient magazine. Now, as Norbec crashed into the cabin, he leaped to his feet, wild surprise in his eyes as he stared at the ghostlike intruder. He was unarmed, his belt and the gun he had taken from the sheriff when he had made his escape dangling from a peg on the wall several feet away.

"Cold turkey, Reno!" Norbec said flatly. "Don't make me make a dead one out of yuh!"

With incredible quickness, Reno half-wheeled and leaped toward the gun-belt on the peg. But Norbec was just as quick, and closer to the gun-belt. His gun-barrel rose and fell, driving against Reno's curly blond head.

Reno grunted, his knees buckled, and he crumpled down to the floor. He was not unconscious, but half-stunned and helpless for a moment. Norbec took his gun.

Almost gently he helped Reno Deming to his feet and to a chair. A trickle of blood was running down over Reno's cheek.

"Sorry, Reno," Norbec murmured. "Why'd yuh make me do it?"

"I had to try," Reno said, and grinned twistedly up at Norbec, "or I'd always wondered whether I made a mistake. I was careless about that gun. I should have known yuh'd think of this place. How yuh been, Bill?"

"Not so good," Norbec said. "Folks down there are sayin' that I let yuh escape from jail. They're even hintin' it was mebbe me that helped yuh rob that stage."

Reno Deming laughed, a deep-throated sound that held all its old devil-may-care recklessness. He was as tall as Norbec, but more slender, with curly blond hair and ice-blue eyes that held cynicism and a certain wildness. Except for that wildness, Norbec had thought, lovely Jan Kerry would have chosen handsome Reno Deming instead of him.

"So they think that, do they?" Reno's grin was mocking. "Less than six months, and they think the man they elected high sheriff has turned crooked!"

"Mebbe they don't really believe it was me that helped yuh rob the stage," Norbec said tightly, "but they think I let yuh escape. I can't blame 'em much. They know we used to be saddlemates. They know how we used to side each other."

Reno kept on grinning. "We did, didn't we? But that was before yuh started wearin' a deputy's badge under old Ben Gunderlock and I started me up a little cow outfit."

"That shouldn't have made any difference. But raisin' dogies was too slow for you. Yuh turned crooked—or mebbe the crookedness was there inside yuh all the time."

"Shore, it was," Reno jeered. "Saddlemates, you and me—but always I was the wild one that got us into trouble, you the one who got us out. Then we both fell for that yellow-haired schoolmarm down at Antlers—Jan Kerry. It steadied you, but not me. You got to be a deputy, then sheriff. What we'd been through together didn't keep yuh from jailin' me on a stage-

robbin' charge."

"And it didn't keep yuh from trickin' me," Norbec said grimly. "Playin' sick and tollin' me into yore cell so's yuh could stick a gun in my middle and bust out. Where'd yuh get the gun?"

"Right out of yore own holster, Bill. You forget?" Reno grinned again. "I didn't tell the jury my pard's name, and I won't tell you."

"Suit yoreself." Bill Norbec shrugged, his back to the glowing sheet-iron stove. "Yore stubbornness in the court room got yuh a life sentence, when likely yuh'd have got off with ten or fifteen years if yuh'd talked, if yuh'd told who the gent was that helped yuh hold up the stage and shot the driver in cold blood as he was sittin' there with his hands in the air. Yuh know that, don't yuh?"

"Look, Bill." Reno quit grinning. "I'm a worthless skunk, I admit it. I helped rob that stage, and mebbe it wasn't the first one. Shore, I knew I'd get off lighter if I blabbed on my pardner in that holdup. But some things a man don't do. That's one of 'em. You ought to savvy that."

"I savvy yuh're a cussed mule-headed fool!" Norbec said harshly.

They were silent a moment, staring at each other—Norbec angry-eyed and resentful, Reno Deming with that reckless, jeering grin that came and went so easily curling his lips. Former saddlemates, but with a bottomless chasm between them now.

Outside, they could hear the high shrill scream of the bitter wind. They could hear the rattle and scrape of the ice-covered tree limbs, like the macabre dancing of a skeleton legion. The cloud masses shrouding the cathedral-like peaks boiled and started advancing.

SO IT had come to this, Bill Norbec thought bitterly. There was no doubt of Reno's guilt. The stagecoach had been stopped on a rough section of the trail five miles north of Antlers, by two masked men. The mask of one of the looters had slipped briefly, allowing the driver to recognize the bandit as Reno Deming. Maybe that was why the other bandit—not Reno—had shot the driver as he sat there with upraised hands, but more likely it was because the man had the black heart of a killer wolf.

The driver had lived just long enough to make his accusation against Reno Deming. At the trial, Reno had jeered, and stubbornly refused to divulge the identity of his partner in crime. He had laughed when they asked him what had become of the twenty thousand dollars in bank currency which they had taken off the stage. Angered, the jury had sentenced him to life at Deer Lodge, even though it was established that he had not fired the shot that killed the stage driver.

The trick by which Reno had escaped was ridiculously simple. He had chewed soap, and rolled on the floor, and called to Bill Norbec that he was dying. Norbec had rushed unsuspectingly into the cell. Then, when Norbec had stooped over him, Reno had grabbed the sheriff's gun and clubbed Norbec over the head with it. Norbec had regained consciousness an hour later to find Reno gone on a stolen horse, his trail covered by falling snow.

"I should have known," Reno was saying, "not to head for this abandoned cabin here in the Bearclaws. We first ran across it years ago—remember? It was always kept stocked with grub, for anybody that got caught in the hills in a storm. It come in handy for us more'n once. I knew yuh'd remember it sooner or later. Yet in that snowstorm, it was the only place to go."

"I thought of it," Norbec said slowly, "and hoped yuh wouldn't be here."

"But I was. And now yuh aim to try to take me back to jail."

"I aim to *take* yuh, Reno."

"I doubt it," Reno said grimly.

"Why should yuh? I've got the guns. We've got two hosses."

"And a blizzard about to slap us between the eyes! Yuh can't go far in a Montana blizzard, Bill."

"We'll hole up here till it's over."

"And eat icicle steaks?"

Reno's mocking tone jerked Norbec's gaze about the room. Always the stock of food had been in a tarpaulin-covered box in a corner of the room. Now only the tarpaulin was there, and it had been ripped to shreds.

"Like that, huh?" Norbec asked quietly.

"Like that." Reno nodded. "I managed to salvage enough for two square meals, and I've been here three days. The cabin door was open, and most of the grub gone or ruined. A bear, I reckon. So what

now, Sheriff? This blizzard might last a week. It might snow us in for a month."

Norbec had instantly made his decision.

"Get ready to ride, Reno," he said quietly. "We're headin' for the lowlands."

"It's ten miles to Antlers," Reno argued. "The blizzard'll hit us before we've gone three."

"We can't stay here without food," Norbec snapped. "Get on yore feet and into yore coat!" Reno's mocking grin infuriated him, and he spat, "Jump, blast yuh, or I'll pistol-whip yuh and pack yuh out like a dead buck!"

Reno got unhurriedly to his feet. "Shore yuh would. But yuh won't have to. Go or stay here, starve in a warm cabin or freeze to death in a blizzard—it's all the same to me. Yuh're the only one that's got anything to lose, Bill. Jan might—"

"Shut up, cuss yuh, and move!" Norbec raged.

The wind slammed at them wickedly as they left the cabin. A blue-black twilight lay over the highlands. A momentary hush gripped the hills, as is they quailed with dismay before the threat of what they knew was coming. Among the peaks was a low sound like the rustle of giant wings.

They flung a saddle on Reno's buckskin, and hurried up the side of the timbered slope where Bill Norbec had left his sorrel in a thicket. They mounted, crossed the ridge, and started their race for the valley below.

But both knew from the start that the race was hopeless. They had gone no more than three miles when an icy-cold blast of wind screamed across the ridges, smashing with incredible violence at Norbec and Reno Deming.

IT WAS followed a moment later by a second blast—and then the blizzard hit full force, howling and snarling its fury, bellowing out of canyons, driving a wall of sleet and snow before it. That first insane assault almost drove the breath from the two men.

Norbec looked at Reno. Reno was grinning, his stubble-covered face already being coated with ice and snow.

"Stay close!" Norbec yelled. "If we drift apart we'll never find each other."

"Does havin' company make dyin' any easier?" Reno yelled back.

Instantly a shroudlike pall had hidden all landmarks. But they fought on down through the hills, two puny figures in that howling, swirling maelstrom. They knew that two miles below lay the foot-hills, and five miles beyond that the town of Antlers.

They knew that those seven miles might as well be a hundred.

Reno Deming seemed to think it was a good joke. Once he fought his horse up close to Norbec's, and shouted:

"Still think yuh'll take me back, Sheriff? The joke's on you. Me, I'm satisfied. I'd rather die here, all snug and warm under the snow, than go to prison. But yuh've got a lot to live for. If yuh could make it, you and Jan could get married."

"Get on—get on!" Norbec ordered harshly.

Every minute seemed an hour. The sleet and snow slashed at their faces. Their bodies were numb with cold. The wind slammed and hammered at them, trying to drag them from saddle. It shoved and wrestled them over spiny ridges. It flogged them and snarled at them, leaving them gasping for breath. Finally, like giant hands, it seized them and jammed them against a rock wall.

Here they huddled, gaining momentary respite from the savage wind, but not from the penetrating cold.

"We'll never make it," Reno said calmly.

"We've got to make it," Norbec growled. "We're almost out of the hills."

Reno's mocking grin made a gargoylish mask of his ice-coated face. "Antlers'll still be five miles away. We'll do good to last two more miles. You know that."

Norbec knew that. They had to have shelter and warmth, or die. He swore bitterly under his breath. As Reno had said, *he* had plenty to live for. Laughing, yellow-haired Jan had promised to marry him in the spring.

"Move out," he said. "We'll go on."

"Wait!" Reno had stopped grinning, was looking at him curiously. "We can't make it to Antlers. But we could make it to the Rath boys' ranch. It's not over a mile and a half from here."

Norbec had thought of the Rath brothers, Nick and "Red". They owned a little outfit at the base of the hills. Although nothing definite had been proved against

them, the Raths had an unsavory reputation. Bill Norbec's dislike of them dated back several years, to before he had started wearing a badge.

"I don't cotton to bein' snowbound with the Raths for several days, even if we could find the ranch, which is doubtful," he said. "We'll try to make Antlers."

Reno swore softly, then clamped his lips. By main force they shoved away from the wall and fought on. The wind screamed its triumph and fury as it slammed at them. Each minute was interminable. Each icy yard they covered seemed twenty.

Norbec realized suddenly that he hardly felt the cold, that he was feeling drowsy—and knew that he was about done.

He heard Reno yelling at him, and turned his head. Reno was bawling something at him in an angry voice.

"Yuh half-witted ox!" Reno shouted. "The Rath place is less'n a mile over yonder now. We can make it easy."

Faintly derisive, Norbec yelled back, "Singin' a different tune, ain't yuh? Thought yuh'd as soon die out here!"

Reno Deming swiped at his eyes. "Mebbe I've changed my mind! Mebbe dyin' ain't such a good idea. Commit suicide if yuh want to. Me, I'm headin' for the Rath place. Trail along, shoot me in the back, or do what yuh danged please."

Reno swerved his horse sharply to the left. Without hesitation, Norbec did the same. For he knew now, with utter finality, that they couldn't make it to Antlers. The Rath ranch was their only chance.

NOW the wind was at their backs, driving them before it. The snow and sleet made a dense gray curtain that billowed about them, making vision beyond a few yards impossible. More by instinct than by sight they fought their way toward the Rath ranch.

Bill Norbec didn't relish the thought of asking the Rath brothers for shelter for himself and his prisoner. Nick was the older of the two, but no less violent and evil-tempered than his younger brother. Red Rath was the wild one, swaggering and arrogant, a hard-drinking, poker-playing youngster who was always brawling and fighting.

Young Red it was who always wore on his shirt-front a solid gold stick-pin shaped like a horseshoe. Red claimed it brought him luck, in poker and fighting, and apparently believed it.

The low ranch buildings appeared suddenly in the gray pall before them. Relief slapped at Norbec. He had about decided that they had missed the Rath place. But here before them was the squat log cabin, an orange glow of light showing at a window, and beyond was the barn, and smaller sheds.

Reno looked at him, his grin an icy grimace, and shouted something the lawman couldn't make out. They stopped before the cabin. Norbec had to make three tries before he could make his numbed muscles respond enough to swing him to the ground. Then fierce pain shot up from his feet to his shoulders, and if he hadn't clutched at the saddle he would have fallen.

He staggered after Reno who already was struggling through the drifted snow toward the cabin door. When he got there Reno was pounding on the heavy door with his fists.

It seemed to Norbec a full minute before the door was pulled partly open and a man bulked in the opening. The man was Nick Rath, and he had a gun in his hand. The big, thick-shouldered rancher peered out at the two figures, surprise and wariness making a pattern on his dark, beak-nosed features.

"That you, Reno?" Nick asked.

"Yeah," Reno said adding quickly, "and Bill Norbec's with me. I'm his prisoner, if it makes any difference."

"Norbec?" Nick Rath scowled, turned his head and spoke to somebody in the room. "It's Bill Norbec, with Reno Deming."

He stood there a moment, while the murmur of another voice sounded inside the cabin. Impatiently Norbec pushed past Reno, placed his shoulder against the door and shoved. He crowded past Nick Rath into the warm, lamp-lighted room.

"We're freezin'," he said thickly. "I didn't come here from choice, but because it was our only chance. Yuh'll have to put us up until—"

His words dribbled away, and suddenly he felt as if a mighty fist had slammed him between the eyes. Red Rath, a tall, hawk-faced young man with reckless tawny eyes, stood with his back to the

glowing stove. But it was sight of the figure leaning against a far wall that hit Norbec with such savage impact.

"Jan!" he said in a hoarse, shocked voice. "What in heaven's name are you doin' here?"

Jan Kerry was a slender, yellow-haired girl with sky-blue eyes and a strong, well-rounded body. Her lovely face was pale, her eyes wide as she stared at Norbec and Reno Deming. She pushed away from the wall, started toward Norbec; and stopped.

"Bill!" Norbec couldn't tell whether there was relief or fear in her voice. "You—I was out riding—it's Saturday, you know, and no school—and got caught in the blizzard. I was barely able to make it to here."

"That's right," Red Rath spoke up, grinning, his eyes on Norbec. "If she'd tried to make it back to town she'd have been a goner. We told her she could put up here as long as she wanted. What you two doin' out in such weather?"

Norbec glanced at Reno, not answering immediately. Reno was staring at the girl, his wet face sober, a peculiar light in his eyes. Nick Rath had holstered his gun and closed the door. He crossed to the stove, still scowling, watching Bill Norbec. There was a queer tension in the room.

NORBEC removed his mittens and sheepskin, thinking about this. On the surface there seemed nothing wrong. Logically Jan could have been caught near here by the blizzard, because she loved to ride. Logically she would have made for the nearest shelter. And yet—

"The sheriff was takin' me back to jail," Reno Deming answered Red's question. "I saw we couldn't make it to Antlers, so I talked him into headin' for here. Seems like we got quite a gatherin'."

"Ain't we?" Red Rath laughed, with sly amusement, fingering the horseshoe stickpin on his shirt front. "A few days ago I thought my luck had run out, but now I see it hasn't."

"Red, yuh talk too much," Nick said.

"Do I? I don't see the need of—"

"Shut up!" Nick ordered harshly.

Jan had crossed and sat down on a bunk. "Bill," she said, "after getting warm and eating, you and Reno could probably make it on to town by night. Don't you think so?"

"Likely," Norbec nodded. "And you, too."

"No, I don't think so," she said quickly. "I got awfully cold a little while ago. I think it would be best if I stayed here, for tonight at least. But you—"

"What's wrong with this ranch?" Red demanded. "We couldn't think of lettin' any of yuh go out in this blizzard. Ain't that the way you see it, Reno?"

"Mebbe." Reno shrugged. "I'm just a prisoner—remember? I'm not supposed to have any opinions."

There was, Norbec knew now with crystal clarity, something here that he didn't understand. Something unseen but sensed, like a killer lurking in the dark outside a circle of firelight. Reno sensed it, too, or maybe he knew what it was. His face remained taut and sober, and there was a troubled light in his usually mocking eyes. His gaze kept roving the room, returning always to the girl.

"Jan, how did yuh get here?" Norbec asked suddenly.

The abrupt question startled Jan. Color flooded her face. "Why, I—I told you!" she stammered. "I was out riding and the blizzard caught me."

"Yuh'd known for hours that the blizzard was on its way. Yuh had plenty of time to get back to Antlers. Why didn't yuh?"

"Yuh accusin' the lady of lyin', Sheriff?" Red Rath demanded coldly, his hand near the silver haft of the gun he wore. "She told yuh how she got here and why. We Raths don't like to see a lady insulted, by a sheriff or anybody else!"

"Red!" Nick Rath warned. "Be careful."

"To thunder with bein' careful!" Red ripped out. "Bein' careful brings more trouble than money. This cussed star-toter was dumb enough to stick his head into a bear trap, and now he's liable to get it pinched off! That what you say, Reno?"

Reno said nothing. He stood with his hands on the back of a chair, his icy blue eyes still and thoughtful. Jan Kerry sat tensely on the bunk, the fear that had lurked deep in her eyes now vividly plain.

Bill Norbec took two backward steps, which placed his back almost against the door, squarely facing the Rath brothers.

Now there was no uncertainty in his mind. Jan Kerry was not here from choice. She was in danger, knew that Bill Norbec was in danger, and had tried to warn him. There was something between the Raths and Reno Deming, some knowledge or secret understanding.

Norbec could feel the stout cabin tremble as the wind slammed against it. He listened to the howl of the storm, to the hissing patter of snow and sleet, and made his decision.

He had to know what he was up against, and waiting would only make matters worse. He was warm now, his fingers limber and tingly.

HE KNEW the odds against him, and accepted them, because there was nothing else he could do: Two to one—three, counting Reno, who was unarmed, but always dangerous.

"Jan, put on yore coat and get ready to ride," he said quietly. "You too, Reno. We're headin' for Antlers."

"Now, wait a minute!" Red snarled. "Nobody's goin' anywhere! Not tonight, at least."

"Yore mistake, Red," Norbec drawled. "Yuh forgettin' I'm sheriff?"

"I'm not forgettin'—and that's the reason yuh're not goin' anywhere! Yuh're stayin' right here, mebbe a long, long time."

"Red, yuh're makin' a mistake," Nick warned heavily. "No good can come of yore talk."

"I'll decide that," Red said furiously. "Blast yuh, Nick, are yuh with me or against me?"

"With yuh, Red. Always with yuh. All right—mebbe yuh've got the right idea. The girl can't go back. And what Bill Norbec don't know now he could guess. Yuh're right—he can't go either."

Jan had shrugged into her greatcoat.

"Over here, Jan," Norbec said to her. "Open the door and get out of here!"

A wicked oath exploded from Red Rath's lips. "Nobody goes anywhere!" he yelled again.

Three men grabbed for their guns at the same time. A red holocaust of gunfire broke in the narrow room.

Because he knew that Nick, despite his size, was the fastest man with a gun, Norbec focused his attention first on the dark-faced rancher. He saw Nick draw with unbelievable speed, saw flame froth from his rising gun-muzzle and felt the burn of the bullet across his ribs.

Then he felt the kick of his own .45 against his palm and heard its deep-throated roar. He saw Nick jerk and shiver and wheel half-about, then turn the gun muzzle back toward him. At the same instant, with bitter clarity, he knew that Red Rath's gun was leveling on him.

He heard Jan scream. From the corner of his eye he saw Reno Deming lift and fling the chair with a movement almost too quick to follow, heard the chair splinter as it crashed against Red's face and chest. Red reeled backward, and his gun spouted flame and lead into the floor.

Norbec fired again, at Nick. Nick broke in the middle, and seemed to bend over to examine something on the floor.

Red Rath regained his balance and whirled back, his hawkish face a snarling mask of fury as he looked at Reno. Reno was plunging across the room in a headlong dive at Red.

"You doublecrossin' skunk!" Red screamed.

[*Turn page*]

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Norbec jerked his gun muzzle around, and fired. But Red's six-shooter had already blasted. Reno seemed to collapse in midair like an empty sack. He fell and rolled against the wall.

Red turned slowly to look at Norbec. His gun was dangling at his side and the wicked fury was raining from his eyes. Then, stiff-legged, Red walked to a chair and sat down, but instantly rolled out of the chair and fell to the floor. He didn't move again.

Nick also was on the floor, on his face, motionless.

Norbec crossed and knelt beside Reno Deming, lying there motionless on his back. Reno's eyes were open and he was breathing. But there was a great crimson stain spreading on his shirt front. Reno was dying, and the knowledge was there in his pain-bright eyes as he looked up at Bill Norbec.

"Easy, old son," Norbec said, his voice ragged with grief. "I'll fix yuh up!"

He started fumbling with Reno's shirt. But Reno stopped him.

"Yuh wouldn't—lie to me—would yuh, Bill?" That mocking smile twisted his lips. "I'm not kickin'. This is all right. Better'n Deer Lodge. It was Red that helped me—rob that stage—that killed the —stage driver. Red's gone now, and blabbin' won't make me—any more of a skunk than—already am, will it?"

"Yuh're a man, Reno, like I always knew. When yuh saw Red about to kill me, yuh remembered how we used to ride and play and fight together."

"Hogwash!" Reno's breathing was slow and harsh, but that old reckless grin still curled his lips. "Why yuh think I talked —into headin' here instead—of Antlers? So Red and Nick could help me—that's why. But I never did—like Red—why I hit him. Yuh tryin' to make out I—turned soft? Dang yuh—Bill. . . ."

Reno stopped talking. He never would talk any more.

NORBEC straightened. He felt a hand on his arm, and turned. Tears shone brightly in Jan Kerry's eyes.

"How'd yuh get here?" he asked for the third time.

"Red Rath brought me," she said. "I'd heard the talk about town that maybe it was you who had helped Reno rob the stage. I was afraid somebody would really believe it, so this morning I rode out to the spot on the trail where the stage was robbed, intending to search for a clue as to who the other bandit was. Somebody was there ahead of me. I crept up close and saw that it was Red Rath. He was digging about in the snow at the base of a wall beside the trail. That was where the bandit who shot the stage driver had stood, you remember.

"I stayed hid and saw Red pick something up off the ground. He seemed awfully relieved, and then I saw what he'd picked up was the gold horseshoe stickpin there on his shirt. I started to leave, but my foot dislodged some rock, and Red saw me. I didn't have a gun, so there was nothing I could do. Red said I'd seen too much—which was true, of course—and made me come here to the ranch with him."

"Did they—"

"No, they didn't hurt or mistreat me. Of course"—she shuddered—"they probably would have killed me. Red admitted helping rob the stage and killing the driver. He bragged about several other robberies he and Nick had committed. He showed me the stolen money—it's under a loose plank there in the floor. They'd already told me what to say if anybody showed up and saw me here. I knew that if I tried to warn you they would shoot you down in cold blood. Oh, Bill, if it hadn't been for you. . . ."

"If it hadn't been for Reno," Norbec said slowly, "we'd both probably be dead by now. He knew when he threw that chair that Red would kill him. Reno was my saddlemate."

His arm about Jan Kerry's slim waist, he looked down at Reno Deming. And the bitter wind, storming down from the white peaks, seemed to sing a wild and lonely requiem.

Next Issue: LONG SAM BLASTS A BLASTER, a Smash-Packed Yarn by LEE BOND—and Many Other Stories by Your Favorite Writers!

Budge's fist landed with fierce impact

PLUMB BOGGED DOWN

By CLIFF WALTERS

Easy-going, kind-hearted Budge Bronson shows some unsuspected savvy when he pits himself against a scheming ranch manager!

IT TOOK a good-sized horse to carry Budge Bronson who, according to consensus on the range lying between the Big Horns and the Rockies proper, possessed the brawn and all the intellectuality of the ox. The horse, a pot-bellied, drowsy old roan that woke up only when he stumbled on a rock or sage-brush root, was jogging toward Basin City this bright May morning.

When the roan stumbled and inflicted momentary discomfort upon his rider, Budge Bronson didn't swear and jerk hard on the reins, one of which was a

twice-riveted strand of leather and the other a piece of pack rope. Nor did the rider with the mild blue eyes and shaggy, straw-colored hair rake with his one spur the erring steed. Realizing that he himself had stumbled often along the road of life, Budge merely guided his lethargic mount toward smoother going.

Having left his isolated cabin at Pocket Springs early this particular morning, Budge jogged his way down to the head of Alkali Creek, a miniature basin cradled in the staunch embrace of red, prowlike bluffs. Gypsite dust, powdered to the fineness of flour, floated up like sun-shot scarves from the hoofs of the roan and settled on the rider's limp black hat, on the recently washed but unironed cotton shirt that was too tight through the shoulders, and on the ancient blue serge pants donned for special occasions only.

Meadow larks serenaded the wayfarer. A hawk cruised above spring-warmed foothills and watched a mother sagehen leading a dozen chicks along the crooked, rocky vertebrae of a ridge spine. A pair of bluebirds flitted along a sunlit draw and wove bright ribbons of color through the greasewood growing there.

SUDDENLY, without stumbling, the roan horse was alert enough to prick up his ears and look off to the west of the trail. Budge looked in the same direction and saw a lanky man, boots and overalls smeared with gumbo mud, approaching. Herb Lathrop, manager of the Alkali Ranch, wore a dour expression. That wasn't like Herb, either. The homely, ample-nosed cowman usually had a grin for everyone he met. Budge detoured toward the man afoot.

"Darned if yuh don't look like a sandhill crane, Herb, with all that slough mud on yore legs," he drawled pleasantly. "Yuh'd better not let it dry till yuh can't bend your knees. Folks'll swear yuh're walking on stilts."

"If I don't laugh till my sides hurt, Budge, don't think it's because I'm oversensitive about my height," Herb said, looking at the rider's blue serge pants. "I wish I could be as big as you are just for a few minutes after I get back to the ranch, though."

"Why?"

"I'd walk up to that pretty sorrel horse that left me afoot out here, nearly ten miles from home. I'd take his head gently between my arms and twist it off right where the throat latch goes."

"Did he buck yuh off and head for home?"

"He trotted off and left me when I needed a horse the worst way. When I was starting to drag some bogged cattle out of Carcass Slough over there." Herb Lathrop waved a long arm toward the west. "Must be eighteen-twenty head of AZ cattle bogged down right now. I've got to have a horse right away, Budge. And some help."

"If I didn't have to get on down to Basin City, and if I wasn't dressed up in my best clothes—" Budge said worriedly. With a hefty hand he massaged the horn of the saddle that had been worn out when he had acquired it ten years ago.

Tersely Herb Lathrop answered, "I admit yuh look dandied up like the fellow modeling Parade Leader shirts on page thirty-two in the mail order catalogue, but in an emergency like this— Why are yuh in such a rush to reach Basin City?"

"The Spring term of court's setting there."

"What about it?"

"Well, Rusty Donahue's trial's coming up today. And, while I ain't been advertising it, I happened to see—from quite a ways off and through that old pair of field glasses yuh traded me for a week's work—the battle Rusty and Sam Clark had that day over by Hat Crown Butte. And, while I ain't been ordered to, I kind of feel it's up to me to go to that courtroom and tell what I seen."

"I savvy," Lathrop said a little bitterly. "In other words, while a bunch of poor, dumb cattle are sinking to their death in Carcass Slough, yuh're willing to go to Basin City and show off yore blue serge pants. And meddle in business that don't concern you. Oh, I know that Sam Clark's a friend of yores, and that he loaned yuh his bay teamr to haul wood last winter. But don't worry. Clark'll come out all right at that trial, and without yore testimony. Rusty Donahue's the one that'll have to worry."

"Looks like yuh're not doing much to help him," Budge said soberly. "It looks like, when yuh've kept Rusty working for yuh steady the last two years—steady

except for the time he wasn't in jail—yuh'd be in Basin City trying to do what yuh could for him. Besides, he's yore cousin."

"I've hired a lawyer for him," Lathrop said. "And for the last time. Maybe it hasn't dawned on yuh yet, Mr. Bronson, but I'm supposed to be running a valuable, if rather small, cow outfit for old Mac McAllister that now resides in California—on account of his wife's weak heart. I'm not running a camp for the correction of wayward cousins. I've tried to help Rusty. I've failed. I can't keep my rope on him and give it a gentle tug every time he drinks, gambles, smiles at the wrong girl or gets in a fight. He does what he pleases. And when. And trying to stop him is like trying to stop that hawk up there from pouncing on a cottontail rabbit."

"He's been pretty bad, all right."

"And yet," said lanky Herb Lathrop, "bad as he is, I don't think he could turn his head and ride past a dumb, helpless brute that was dying by inches in a boghole. Yuh're coming to help get those cattle out of that slough, Budge. Yuh've got to. Don't worry about ruining yore blue serge pants. I'll buy yuh a new pair. Maybe I'll even buy yuh that new saddle yuh've been praying for, instead of hustling for, ever since I knew yuh."

"New saddle?" Budge said in awe.

"I'm not being generous. I'm desperate. I'm expecting old Mac McAllister to drop in at the ranch any day now. What if he was to come today? Come out to this part of his range and see eighteen, twenty head of cattle trapped in Carcass Slough?"

"He'd probably wonder why yuh hadn't got that boghole fenced by this time," Budge said blandly. "I heard him romp all over yuh two years ago this spring about not fencing that bog."

"If yore memory's so darned good, maybe yuh'll recall that I had a bunch of cedar posts and several spools of barbed wire hauled out here once. But somebody hauled all those posts and all the wire away one night. Yore hide-buyer friend, Sam Clark, was driving over this range about that time. Oh, I'm not saying Sam's a thief, but—"

"Rusty Donahue said he was, though," Budge interrupted. "When he said it to me, over in Chainville, I shoved him against the wall of the Stockmen's Saloon and made him take his words back. I come as close to hitting Rusty that day as I've ever come to hitting anybody. Later, Rusty claimed I wasn't just sticking up for Sam Clark. He claimed I was just sore because, when I thought you was giving me a steady job at the AZ, he come along a week later and took my job away from me."

"I wish I'd never given him that chance," Lathrop answered. "I should have kept you, Budge. But Rusty's off the AZ payroll now, and if yuh want the job back—a good, steady job—"

"I sure would, Herb. I've got to find some work soon."

"Maybe a steady job and three square meals a day would do yuh more good than a new saddle," Lathrop said.

"Maybe it would," Budge agreed.

"Now you're showing some sense." Lathrop offered a sack of tobacco and papers along with his smile. "Maybe I was justified in standing up for yuh against a bunkhouse orator the other night."

"What was that?"

"This gabby gent was digging the rowels into yuh because you're thirty-five years old and can't read or write. I told him that didn't mean yuh couldn't think. He said if yuh could think any faster than the ox yuh was yuh wouldn't have wound up living in an old log shack on the poorest, rockiest homestead on the whole range. I explained to him that yore dad, an old trapper, was buried there, and that it was the only home yuh'd ever had. Then Mr. Orator started hooting about the way yuh let folks—folks that hire yuh when they can't get anybody else—palm worthless junk off onto yuh for wages.

"He said yuh didn't have a dooryard; yuh had a junkyard out there at Pocket Springs. He mentioned that he'd seen a set of harness for a pair of Shetland ponies, a stuffed eagle and even a broken down sewing machine. He also joshed me pretty hard about trading yuh a pair of field glasses, with one broken lens and a no-good adjustment screw, for a week's work. Of course, I shouldn't have done that, Budge."

"I can see with 'em," the big man said. "The reason I took the Shetland pony harness was that I wanted to give it to the little Johnson kid that lost his leg after

being caught in a bear trap. He couldn't ride a pony any more, and he was praying for a team of Shetlands up until the day he died.

"The old sewing machine was all the Widow Dorn could offer me as pay for a month's work when the bank took her homestead. I wouldn't have taken it if it could have been used. As for the stuffed eagle, I won it for being the worst rifle shot at a turkey shoot in Chainville twelve years ago. Folks had a big laugh about it. And I had a pretty slim Thanksgiving dinner that year."

"Yuh'd eat better if yuh wasn't always dividing what little grub yuh've got with some of those range bums that stop at yore cabin," Lathrop answered. "Take old Jug Jones that used to teach school in Chainville, before he turned drunkard. Every time they run him out of town, he heads for yore place and stays there for weeks at a time."

"Sinner's Sanctuary, he calls it," Budge said. "He's always welcome. And he's good at killing rabbits with rocks."

"If yuh eat any more cottontails, yuh're going to start laying back yore ears and crouching under a sagebrush every time yuh hear a coyote yelp," Lathrop said, grinning.

"Don't yuh think we ought to start worrying about them—those bogged dogies instead of what I eat?" Budge asked, looking sadly down at his blue serge pants. "My best clothes. But them that hath must lose, they say."

"Yuh won't lose anything by helping me," Lathrop assured him. . . .

It was hard, nasty work, pulling those mud-smeared cattle free of the deep, oozing gumbo in which they were trapped. It was Budge who dug in the stagnant mud around the chilled, unfeeling legs of those cattle. He used an old broken handled shovel left here long ago by Mac McAllister, when the slough had been only one-tenth as large. It was brawny, willing Budge who gripped a mud-slickened cow's tail, and tugged and strained while Herb Lathrop, on Budge's old roan, manipulated the rope which anchored the horns of a cow to the saddle horn.

Budge's cotton shirt was a smear. His worn-out boots were soggy lumps, and his blue serge pants could no longer be identified by color. Sweat dripped from his shaggy blond hair. His big hands and wrists were mittened in smelly, bluish-black mud fibered with cow hair. The sun climbed higher. Herb Lathrop tossed the wire-stiff lariat to the ground and rode off to turn a little bunch of cattle stringing from the mouth of a red draw toward the dangerous waterhole. He headed them toward Alkali Creek.

Budge Bronson, taking a well deserved breather, watched a bunch of range horses trailing in silhouette along the west rim of the little basin. The buckskin in the lead stopped, arched its neck and nickered. From out of the deep, cedar-studded ravine below came an answering neigh. Then Herb Lathrop was back and picking up the lariat he had discarded.

"You want to do the rope pulling for a while, Budge?" he asked.

"I'm in the muck now up to my neck. I'll stay in it," Budge replied. "Yuh'd better get this place fenced before old Mac comes out and sees it."

"That's going to be yore first job when you start working at the AZ," Lathrop said. "If Sam Clark hadn't got away with—" He stopped.

"Sam didn't take those posts and that wire," Budge said. "Rusty Donahue was driving past here with a four-horse team about that time, scattering rock-salt up on the mountain slope. It's my guess he got away with that wire and those posts. He probably sold 'em down at the railroad where he was hauling salt from."

"Unless yuh can prove that, Budge—"

"I can add two and two."

"I've always heard you couldn't," Lathrop retorted with a grin. "Maybe, though, yuh're better at arithmetic than yuh are at reading and writing. But let's not argue, neighbor. Let's just rest a while and figure out where we'll build the new fence."

"I believe that, after all, I'll take the new saddle yuh offered me instead of the job," Budge said.

"Now what? Ain't yuh as work-brittle as yuh thought yuh was?"

"And the new pants yuh offered me," Budge went on.

"Yuh wouldn't feel that was taking too much for a hard day's work?"

"Not in this case," Budge said. "I'm saving cattle that are worth quite a price. Not that I expect Mac McAllister to foot

the bill. It ain't his fault the fence wasn't built. Maybe yuh'd better fork over about seventy-five dollars right now, Herb." Budge walked toward Lathrop.

"Sure," the lanky man said, reaching for his pocketbook. "What's got into yuh all at once, Budge? Is this dirty work getting on your nerves?"

"Dirty work always did, Herb."

"I don't like the way yuh say that," Lathrop said, handing over some currency. "Maybe yuh'll be kind enough to explain while I write out a receipt for yuh to put yore X on." Lathrop was already writing with the stub of an indelible pencil. He said, "We've still got four head of cattle to pull out. Yuh're not collecting your blackmail ahead of time and then leaving, are yuh?"

"I'll stay till the job's done. But what do yuh mean by blackmail?"

"What else could yuh call it?" Lathrop said angrily. "Here. Put yore X on the bottom of this receipt. Right there."

Budge took the proffered pencil, pressed the slip of paper against the skirt of his old saddle and laboriously, slowly affixed his X. He started to hand pencil and paper back to Herb Lathrop. But the latter had turned to watch a rider, mounted on a white horse, coming up the creek trail. Herb Lathrop was tense as he said, "Nobody's supposed to ride old Snowman except—"

"Except McAllister," Budge finished. "And that's him."

McAllister, the non-resident owner of the AZ outfit was a stocky, alert-eyed man with iron-gray hair and close-cropped moustache. He rode up to the brink of Carcass Slough, halted his white mount, and calmly sized up the situation. He looked at the four cattle still bogged in the mire, looked at another half-dozen head which lay on the bank, still too weak and numb to gain their feet. So far he had ignored the two men.

"I'm sorry about that fence business, Mac. The riders who was handling this part of the range got jailed about a month ago," Herb Lathrop told his frowning boss.

"So I heard in Basin City last night," McAllister replied. "From what I could gather, Rusty Donahue—I didn't know he was your cousin—is going to spend quite a lot more of his time in jail. But what's the matter with Budge Bronson there? He was never afraid of work. Couldn't he dig post holes and string barbed wire easier than he could wallow around in that gumbo?"

AS nervous as if he were being backed into a boghole, Lathrop said, "I wouldn't call Bronson very work brittle, Mac. He just blackmailed me out of seventy-five dollars for helping to drag these cattle out—when he happened to drift by on his way to town. And he's just refused the steady job I offered him."

"Is that right, Budge?" McAllister's tone was flat.

"Yep." The big man, a sorry looking knight clad in an unsavory armor of gumbo, grinned and walked toward McAllister. "Here's the receipt I just put my X on for Herb, after he gave me the money."

"Hold on, Mac," said Lathrop, sliding from Budge's ancient saddle and hurrying forward. "I'm paying this boghole bill out of my own pocket. It's my fault these cattle bogged down."

"This receipt says a hundred and seventy-five dollars," McAllister said, looking hard at the manager of the AZ. "Not figures, mind you, but all spelled out. Surely you weren't going to include this questionable item on your expense report?"

"Of course not," Lathrop said. His dark eyes smouldered at Budge. "I made two mistakes, Bronson. One when I didn't get this boghole fenced. The other when I let you dig your talons into me for seventy-five dollars."

"I can name two more," McAllister said. "You were pretty sure I wouldn't be showing up until the first of June, the date I usually arrive. Your other mistake was in letting Budge show me that receipt before you could stop him."

"I'll give yuh a chance to make still another mistake, Herb," drawled Budge good-naturedly. "The chance to lose seventy-five dollars by betting me that yore horse got away from yuh and went back to the ranch."

"I didn't see any saddle horse trailing toward the ranch," said Mac McAllister.

"Sure yuh didn't," Budge replied. "Herb's horse is tied in that cedar ravine under the west rim there. He's the horse

that nickered an answer to an old buckskin range mare a while ago. How about it, Herb?"

Lathrop frowned, clenched bony hands and remained silent.

Budge went on, "That's five mistakes. But there's still another, Herb. It just ain't natural for nineteen head of cattle to bog down all at once in this same boghole. Somebody must have crowded these cattle into the muck last night. And torturing dumb brutes is always a mistake, I say."

"Yuh fool," Lathrop said. "Why would anybody—"

"So he could appeal to the pity of, and offer dollar bait to, a flat-broke range bum that was heading for Basin City," Budge said. "Heading there not because he wanted to go, but because his conscience was urging him to offer testimony in a courtroom where Rusty Donahue's on trial. What I can't savvy, Herb, is why yuh set this bogged cattle trap for me here at the head of Alkali when yuh was afraid I might be going to town to testify for Sam Clark, my friend. And after I'd seen that battle between him and Rusty Donahue. Wouldn't it have been easier for yuh, and just as cheap, to try bribing me to testify for yore cousin?"

"He knew you couldn't be bribed," McAllister said.

"Bribes! I don't know what yuh're talking about, Bronson," said Herb Lathrop. "Neither do you, you illiterate ox!" His long, bony hands were clenched tighter than ever now.

"You know exactly what he's talking about, Lathrop," said McAllister. "Your cousin's in a jam. And his past record's against him. I found out in Basin City that you paid a lawyer five hundred dollars to defend Rusty Donahue. I'm wondering, after looking at this receipt, just how much of that five hundred was my money. If you were half as honest as Budge there—"

Pointing an unsteady finger at Budge, Lathrop growled, "If yuh think this dumb ox is such a tin god, and if yuh think I've been cheating on my expense accounts, McAllister, why don't yuh turn the AZ over to Bronson and let him run it?"

"That isn't a bad suggestion," McAllister said. "There's only one hitch—will Budge take the job. He can't read and write. Maybe he can hire a cowpuncher that can do the necessary reading and writing for him. I'd be willing to pay that puncher something extra in wages to—"

A great warmth surged over Budge's mud-chilled body. "Yuh wouldn't have to do that, Mac," he said. "I've learned to read and write pretty darned good in the last two years. Or so the ex-schoolmaster, old Jug Jones, tells me. Jug's more than earned what grub I've given him. And the few pints of whisky, too. He's taught me a lot. Shucks! If I couldn't read, I wouldn't have showed yuh that receipt Herb insisted I put my X on. But after he told yuh that he'd paid me seventy-five dollars, and after I'd seen the receipt was made out for a hundred and seventy-five, I thought—"

With great effort Herb Lathrop had been controlling his emotions. Now the wild tide broke beyond restraint. He leaped forward and stopped Budge's talk with a quick, hard blow to the mouth. And there was force enough behind that punch to rock a man of Budge's great stature. Another blow cracked against Budge's cheekbone, and it looked as if the recipient of that attack might go down.

Budge didn't go down, however. He shook his shaggy blond head to clear it. He dodged Herb Lathrop's third blow. Then his own fist landed with fierce impact on Lathrop's mouth. The gangling man rocked backward and plunged headlong into the oozing muck of Carcass Slough.

"Huh!" McAllister grunted. "Bogged down head first that way, he looks like an over-grown wishbone sticking out of the mud."

"Now I've got to drag *him* out," said Budge and waded into the slough.

There was no fight left in Herb Lathrop as he sat wiping his face, after Budge had dragged him to firmer terrain. There was only a sullen defeat on his smeared countenance.

"That's another mistake to be chalked up against you, Lathrop," McAllister told him. "Only a fool would lose his temper with a man of Budge's physique."

"The worst mistake Herb made was when he stopped me from going to town," Budge said. "As much as I dreaded to, and because Sam Clark's my friend, I was go-

(Concluded on page 113)

The Tradin' Hombre runs up against one of the gol-dingedest deals of his life!

As Doc lifted the cloth from the basket, the lawman whipped up his gun

DOC SWAP'S CABIN COUP

By BEN FRANK

MUSIC filled the night.

"Pop! goes the weasel," the old fiddle sang.

Old Doc Swap, sitting in his favorite chair in the neat front room of his cottage at the edge of Dry Bluffs, reckoned he hadn't been in such good fiddle playing trim for a long time. His sock feet stamped out the time on the bare floor, and his round, whiskery face wore a pleased expression. The music sounded so fine he reckoned he ought to round up Sheriff MacLoyd and show him how a good fiddle, rightly played, could just about make the furniture dance all over the room.

Thinking of Sheriff MacLoyd, he frowned slightly and hit a sour note. For forty years, Doc and MacLoyd had been bitter rivals in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—fiddle playin' and swappin'.

Doc lowered his fiddle, and his keen blue eyes lifted to the clock above the native rock fireplace. Eleven o'clock! He realized with a start that he'd been sawing away right at three hours, and he hadn't had his usual nightcap at Goop Gibson's

Palace Saloon.

"Dad-blast time, anyway!" he muttered, laying the red-gold fiddle in its worn case. "Goes faster'n a spooked coyote!"

Ten minutes later, Doc wheezed through the batwings of the Palace. Eyes lifted to his ruddy face, and grins and friendly nods greeted him. Doc was well liked—and good for a little fun. Especially if Sheriff MacLoyd's name could be injected into the conversation.

As Doc waddled up to the bar, he heard Dooley Dobson, the depot agent, mutter,

"First time I ever got a telegram an' didn't know what to do with it. Addressed to Mary Gregg. Don't know no Mary Gregg."

"I do," Doc said.. "She's a new nester in Sugar Valley. Swapped her a basket fer a ole hat."

"No boot?" Cy Pulley, the barber, said with a wink.

Doc remembered the Gregg cabin. The poor furniture. The scanty meal on the table. Mary Gregg's tired, hopeless eyes.

"Doc," Goop Gibson, the barkeep, grinned, "yo're slippin'."

DOC grinned back and nodded his his head. He'd felt mighty sorry for Mary Gregg, left alone with her blue-eyed baby girl. He put one foot on the brass rail and frowned.

"I come fer my nightcap," he said to Goop.

The barkeep dug into the wooden ice-box and came up with a bottle of strawberry pop. When he was in Dry Bluffs Doc never missed having a bottle of strawberry pop before going to bed. As usual, he didn't pay for it. He was a swapper, not a buyer, and had made a trade with Goop a few days before for a case of pop.

"Well," Dooley Dobson growled, "I ain't deliverin' no telegram to Sugar Valley."

Doc took a swig of the pop. Someway it didn't taste quite right. Maybe that was because he was remembering Mary Gregg's eyes and how she'd lost her young husband a short while back.

The depot agent got to his feet.

"Got to be gettin' along," he growled. "Night train's due soon. That telegram was from a Mrs. Crafton in Junction. Said she'd arrive on the mornin' train."

Dooley hobbled out, and Doc returned to his bottle of pop. The Craftons, if he remembered rightly, were a tight-fisted old couple with too much money. Doc had little use for money.

Some winks went around the room behind his back, and Cy Pulley cleared his throat.

"Sheriff MacLoyd," he said loudly, "is the smartest swapper in Bluff County."

Doc choked on a swallow of pop. Everybody in the room grinned happily, for Doc was reacting true to form.

"Yes, sir!" Cy went on. "The sheriff swapped a span of mules and a broken down wagon fer that ole cabin and five acres at the edge of town."

Doc slammed the bottle down hard on the counter. He'd been dickering for that cabin himself. Not that he wanted it, but because he knew MacLoyd had his eye on it. Anything the sheriff wanted, Doc was sure to try to get.

More sly winks went around the room.

"MacLoyd's a real swapper!" Goop Gibson declared.

"Phooey!" Doc snorted. "MacLoyd's a fat-headed ole fool!"

"Yeah?" Wes Shotwell, the blacksmith grinned. "Why don't yuh swap him outa that cabin?"

"Don't want it," Doc mumbled.

"Heh, heh!" Goop Gibson laughed hoarsely, remembering how Doc had wrangled him out of a case of pop with a shotgun that had a kinked barrel. "Yuh're just shootin' off yore mouth, Doc. Yuh couldn't swap him fer that cabin."

Doc felt his face burn and his anger rise. Besides, his reputation as a swapper was being questioned. He pulled his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered the deal one of the highlights of his career—clear down to the tips of his red ears. He glared about the room.

"Lis'n, yuh loco herd of bums," he fumed, "I got a ole Jersey cow I could swap MacLoyd fer that cabin an' the five acres without half tryin'!"

"Mighty hefty braggin', Doc," Cy Pulley said.

Doc pointed a shaking fat finger at Cy.

"If I don't swap that cow fer the cabin, I'll eat my hat!"

"Without salt an' pepper?" Goop Gibson grinned.

That was the last straw. With a snort, Doc turned and slammed through the batwings. He was so riled that he'd even left three swallows of pop in the bottle.

OUTSIDE in the cool night air, he began to calm down. He realized then that he had made some mighty big talk. By morning, Sheriff MacLoyd would likely be informed of his, Doc's, boast, and then the sheriff would be a hard man to handle. Doc, cussing softly, guessed that for once he had stuck his neck out a good mile and the ax was about to fall.

In the distance, the night passenger whistled, but Doc didn't hear it. His eyes were fastened on a yellow gleam fighting to get through the grimy, fly-specked window of the jail office. That light told him that the sheriff was still up and around. Doc reckoned that right now was the time to get the swap under way before someone told MacLoyd what was up.

Wheezing like a leaky steam engine, Doc climbed the three wooden jail steps and shoved into the two-by-four office. MacLoyd sat at his spur-scarred desk, working at a monthly report and eating crackers and cheese. He lifted his pale eyes and eyed Doc with unhidden disapproval.

"I'm a busy man—" he began.

Doc swished off his fancy hat and wiped the sweat from his bald head.

"Yuh're one of the smartest cowmen in the country!"

MacLoyd almost choked on a cracker crumb at this unexpected bit of praise. Then a suspicious gleam came to his eyes.

"Shore, I am," he admitted readily. "But—so what?"

"Remember that fine Jersey cow of mine? The one that gives practically nothin' but cream?"

"Gives practically nothin'—period!" MacLoyd snorted.

Doc ignored the insult and smiled, for he realized that this deal would require considerable tact.

"Sheriff," he said, "yuh're allus gettin' off somethin' funny. Heh, heh!"

MacLoyd's eyes bugged. Doc should have gotten mad, but here he was, laughing at the sheriff's joke. Feeling a touch of confusion, MacLoyd pulled out a hunk of cut plug and took a bite.

"I'm worried about yuh bein' so underweight," Doc went on quickly. "Nothin' like Jersey cream to put meat on a man."

MacLoyd uncrossed his bony, bowed legs and sent a stream of brown juice into a battered spittoon.

His mind was in a whirl, for never before had Doc Swap been interested in his health.

"Yuh wouldn't be thinkin' of givin' me yore cow?" he said cautiously.

Doc nodded soberly. "Yuh guessed it."

MacLoyd ran a long finger over his thin, sunburned nose. He was still confused, but now he began to smell the faint odor of a very dead rat.

"I figured I'd give yuh that cow," Doc went on blandly. "Howsomever, you bein' a upright and just citizen, yuh'd likely want to give me somethin' in return. Mebbe, that cabin—"

Doc stopped short. Somehow, he realized, he'd made the wrong approach, for there could be no mistaking that swapping gleam, which had leaped into MacLoyd's pale eyes.

The sheriff's bony face took on a pleased smile.

"What," he asked carelessly, "are yuh offerin' to boot?"

"To boot!" Doc looked shocked. "That cow is the best—"

"Hoss-reddish!" MacLoyd exploded. "She don't give enough milk to cover the bottom of a .45 shell case!"

Doc slapped on his fancy hat, opened his mouth to make a hot retort, but changed his mind. He had to be careful. He couldn't afford to rile the sheriff at this point, for Doc's reputation as a swapper was at stake.

MacLoyd's grin widened. Nothing he liked better than to get Doc on the short end of a deal.

"Now," he went on, "if you was to throw in yore team of bays an' yore fiddle—"

THAT was insult added to injury, and Doc's white whiskers bristled like the quills on a spooked porcupine. He threw tactfulness overboard and doubled his fat fists.

"Why, yuh dad-blasted ole lop-eared—"

Doc could never talk when he was riled beyond a certain point.

MacLoyd folded his long arms and rocked happily back and forth.

"Not that yore fiddle is worth shucks, but—"

A timid rap at the door stopped him. He unloaded his cud and shoved to his feet.

"Kinda late fer callers," he frowned.

He shuffled to the door and opened it.

"Don't see nobody— Hey, what's this?"

Doc saw him stoop and reach through the door. When he turned, he held a large basket in one bony hand.

"Must be a present," he murmured. "Likely some hombre I done a favor fer has brought me some home-cooked food."

Doc's eyes fixed on the basket. A pink blanket, worn but clean, covered it. The basket, Doc realized with a shock, sure looked mighty familiar.

MacLoyd set the basket on the desk. "Hope it's fried chicken."

A strange sound came from within the basket, and the sheriff leaped back, jerking his six-gun from the holster.

"There's somethin' alive in it!" he growled.

Doc had stepped up to the basket. Carefully he turned back the pink blanket. A pair of big blue eyes stared up at him out of a chubby pink face.

MacLoyd, looking over Doc's round shoulder, sucked in a quick breath.

"It's a—baby!" he said in an awed voice. "An' there's a note pinned to it."

Doc had seen the note. His fat hand flashed out and beat MacLoyd's bony fingers to the paper by a half-second.

"Read it," MacLoyd commanded.

Doc read it, but to himself. The note said,

"Sheriff: I expected Mrs. Crafton to get Susie tonight, but she won't arrive until morning. I can't stay in town all night, or come back in the morning, so I'm leaving Susie with you. Please see that Mrs. Crafton gets her in the morning. Mary Gregg."

"Well," MacLoyd scowled, "what's it say?"

"Tush, tush," Doc murmured unhappily.

But all the time the wheels in his head were spinning like dry leaves in a tornado. He was remembering the poverty of the Gregg shack. The hopeless look on Mary Gregg's face when he'd traded her the basket. He reckoned that Mary had decided it would be best for her baby to let someone else have her. He also guessed that Mary had left the baby for the sheriff to pass on to Mrs. Crafton because Mary was afraid that by morning she couldn't go through with giving up her child. And Mary hadn't had the courage to face the sheriff tonight, a man whom she didn't know. And at that point in his thinking, Doc had an inspiration.

"Why," he murmured, "the note don't say nothin' much. Just that somebody has give yuh a baby."

A horrified expression leaped into MacLoyd's face.

"Give me a baby! Who?"

Doc shook his head. "No tellin'. It just says, 'I'm givin' yuh my baby. Please be good to her.'"

"Her?"

"It's a girl." Doc pretended to read on. "Please be good to her an' feed her pure, rich milk. Her name's Susie."

"Susie!"

"Goo," Susie Gregg said, and kicked at the pink blanket.

The sheriff jumped as if someone had swatted him with a handful of cactus.

"Doc," he said hoarsely, "nobody can give me a baby! Especially a girl baby!"

Doc Swap carefully folded the note and put in into a pocket.

"Why not?" he asked innocently. "Ain't you the sheriff? Ain't it a sheriff's duty to pertect the innocent an'—"

"I won't keep her. I'll—"

"What'll people think? You, a public servant, refusin' to give shelter to a innocent baby! Why, they'll say, yuh're a hard-hearted ole buzzard who oughta be hoss-whipped."

MacLoyd's eyes blinked rapidly as he tried to get a clear picture of the situation.

"Waaw!" Susie Gregg burst out suddenly.

MacLOYD backed against the wall, his bony fingers unconsciously dropping to the butt of his six-gun. All his thinking was cluttered up by that wail.

"Waaw, waaw!" Susie screamed, and got one small foot from under the blanket.

"Reckon I'll be amblin' home," Doc murmured, heading for the door.

MacLoyd blocked the way. His pale eyes were wide and full of terror.

"Yuh can't leave me alone with that," he panted. "Her bawlin' like a bull with

a burr under his tail."

"Feed her," Doc said wisely, "an she'll likely stop."

"Feed her what"

"Why, some good, rich Jersey milk. Now, if you'd swap—"

Dark suspicion leaped into MacLoyd's face. He stepped forward and laid both hands on the edge of the basket.

"Ah, ha!" he said. "So that's yore game, yuh schemin' ole baboon! Doc, let me have a look at that note. I don't—"

His voice choked off in a frightened gurgle, and his eyes got a wild look in them. Susie had stopped crying, but she'd wrapped a small hand about one of the sheriff's bony fingers. MacLoyd forgot there had ever been a note.

"Help, Doc!" he yelled. "She grabbed me!"

"Waaw!" Susie said again, and let go of the finger.

"Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely, "do somethin' quick!"

Smiling happily, Doc lifted the basket and rocked it gently. Susie stopped crying and studied him thoughtfully.

"I reckon there's only one thing to do," Doc said. "Take her to my place an' give her some of that good Jersey milk. Since she's yores, sheriff, yuh'll have to come along."

Smiling behind his ragged whiskers, Doc headed for the door with the basket over his arm. He reckoned that Susie Gregg had saved the day for him. MacLoyd, looking like a whipped dog, trailed along behind.

In the neat white cottage, Doc, remembering back to the days when he'd been right handy at taking care of some nieces and nephews, took charge. He found a bottle in the basket, filled it with Jersey milk and turned Susie loose on it. Her stomach well filled, she immediately went to sleep.

"Reckon I'll be goin' now," Sheriff MacLoyd murmured.

"Yuh'll have to take yore baby with yuh," Doc told him.

MacLoyd, his face losing color, dropped down on a chair.

"I reckon I'll just stay here," he groaned.

During the night, Doc did a heap of thinking, and he realized that he had two tough problems on his hands. The lesser of the two was to swap MacLoyd a cow for the cabin. The real problem, however, was little Susie Gregg.

Whenever Doc Swap had a problem to solve, there was just one thing for him to do—go to Sugar Valley on a swapping spree. Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were traders. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind.

After breakfast the next morning, the old swapper slapped on his fancy hat and started for the door.

"Where yuh goin'?" MacLoyd demanded in a frightened voice.

"To Sugar Valley," Doc told him.

"Yuh can't go away an' leave me with a baby on my hands!" the sheriff bleated.

"Yuh don't have to keep her," Doc said coldly. "Yuh could try to give her to somebody. 'Course people are goin' to do some talkin' about how yuh're shirkin' yore duty, but—"

"I can't keep her," MacLoyd said hoarsely. "She'd starve."

"Yuh could swap me fer that Jersey cow of mine."

MacLoyd's bony face hardened.

"I know what I'll do," he said suddenly. "I'll take Susie an' go with yuh."

Inwardly, Doc gloated. This was the thing he'd been working for all along, but he shook his head slowly.

"We wouldn't have nothin' to feed her."

MacLoyd grinned evilly and got to his feet.

"Simple," he said. "We'll just tie yore Jersey on behind yore wagon. Go hook up yore hosses. Susie an' me are goin' along, an' that's that!"

GRINNING, Doc waddled to the barn, harnessed his team of fat, sleek bays and hooked them to the old covered wagon in which he carried his swappin' goods. Then he put a halter on the old Jersey and tied her to the rear of the wagon.

MacLoyd, carrying the basket as if it held a bushel of dynamite, came out from the cottage, put the basket into the wagon and climbed up on the high spring seat beside Doc. By now, the sheriff was feeling right proud of himself. He reckoned he'd put one over on Doc Swap, making him take Susie along.

Also, going to Sugar Valley for a few days would keep the people of Dry Bluffs

from knowing that he, the sheriff of Bluff County, had an infant on his hands. By the time they got back, he reasoned hopefully, Susie's mother might have a change of heart and want her child back, and all would be well.

"I reckon," he said, "we oughta drive by the jail an' tell Ham Brady that I'll be outa town a few days."

Doc shook out the lines, and the bays moved forward.

"There's a little matter of grub fer us, too," Doc said. While I'm tellin' Ham, yuh can go acrost to Ed Brackett's store an' buy us some groceries."

"Now, lis'n," MacLoyd protested, "I ain't a-goin' to buy no grub fer a ole fat coyote like you."

"Then yuh can climb right outa my wagon with yore baby an' head down the street on foot, yuh tight-fisted ole—"

"Shh!" MacLoyd hissed, his eyes whipping anxiously about. "Not so loud, Doc. I'll buy them groceries, all right."

Doc pulled up in front of the jail and wrapped the lines about the brake handle.

"Susie's asleep," he said, "so yuh can leave her here."

He climbed to the ground and headed into the jail office.

MacLoyd shot a worried glance at the basket under the shade of the canvas wagon cover, then climbed carefully to the ground. He headed for Ed Brackett's general store, swearing at every step. He didn't mind buying grub for himself, but it burned him up to know that he had to feed Doc, too.

Doc found Deputy Ham Brady pacing nervously about the two-by-four office.

"Can't find hide nor hair of the sheriff," Ham said. "The ole fool just up an' disappeared last night."

Doc explained MacLoyd's absence, being careful not to mention Susie, and he said that the sheriff would be out of town for a couple of days. Then he told Ham to meet the morning passenger and tell a Mrs. Crafton, who'd likely get off the train, that Mary Gregg had changed her mind.

"Changed her mind about what?" Ham wanted to know.

"She'll understand," Doc said, turning toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Ham called. He reached behind the desk and came up with a gallon jug. "Ole man Whittle brought the sheriff another gallon of applejack. Mebbe MacLoyd'd like to take it with him."

Doc took the jug. It was heavy. Whistling softly, he headed back to the covered wagon. He reckoned this was one jug of applejack that Sheriff MacLoyd wouldn't drink.

A few minutes later, Doc and the sheriff were heading along the Sugar Creek Trail with Susie sleeping soundly in her basket, quite unaware of the part she was playing in Doc's scheme. As for MacLoyd, he was both angry and worried. Angry because of the cash he'd parted with for the armload of groceries. Worried because he wasn't quite sure where he stood now that he had a baby on his hands. But one thing he did know, he was going to play his cards mighty close to his chest until this baby business was settled. The next election wasn't too far away, and he didn't want people getting the idea that he was a hard-hearted hombre who would chuck an infant out in the cold.

IN THE middle of the morning, they drove up to Ad Trotter's tar-papered shack. Ad, an old bachelor, sat in his creaky rocking chair under the scanty shade of the one unhappy oak that stood in his grassless yard. His bleary eyes shifted from Doc, who was climbing from the covered wagon, to the Jersey tied on behind. Sheriff MacLoyd remained hidden beneath the canvas, casting baleful, yet somewhat tender, looks at Susie, whose blue eyes were fixed admiringly on his tin star.

"Doc," Ad said, "fer once, yuh got somethin' I really want. That Jersey cow."

That stopped Doc flatfooted. He shook his head quickly.

"Got somethin' better'n cow's milk to drink," he said, and lifted the jug of applejack from the wagon.

For the first time, MacLoyd noticed the jug.

"Say," he whispered hoarsely, "ain't that one of my jugs of—"

"Goo," Susie said, and fastened her hand around one of his bony fingers.

The sheriff's face turned both red and pleased, and he forgot all about the jug. Doc lugged it back to Ad Totter.

Ad's leathery face lit up like a full moon. Right away, he lost all interest in the cow.

Doc drove a hard bargain. For the applejack he got a chicken coop and four hens, a young pig, a side of bacon and a roll of rusty barbed wire to boot. Not that Doc had any need for the wire, but he never made a swap without getting something to boot.

When he returned to his wagon, he found Susie cutting a tooth on the sheriff's tin star and gurgling happily.

"Must be mighty hungry to want to eat my star," MacLoyd said worriedly.

Doc studied the situation over and decided MacLoyd might be right. So when they came to a shady spot near the creek, he stopped, and with the aid of the Jersey, saw to it that Susie had a satisfying meal. Further complications arose, but Doc was equal to the occasion. Using MacLoyd's large red bandanna and a couple of safety pins, he fixed everything up in a fairly satisfactory manner. By the time they came to Ike Johnson's homestead, Susie was again sleeping peacefully.

Doc found Ike smoking a blackened corncob pipe and starring unhappily at an empty wire spool and his unfinished garden fence.

"Beats all," Ike said mournfully, "how much wire it takes to keep cattle out of a man's garden so's his wife'll be contented to hoe an' weed it."

"Shore does," Doc agreed. "An' wire is sometimes hard to come by. Lucky I got some for my own garden. A whole roll of it. A mite rusty, but stout as all get-out."

Again Doc drove a hard bargain, swapping the roll of rusty wire for three hens, an old set of harness, a bushel of potatoes and an old washing machine wringer to boot.

"Never seed yuh so hard to dicker with," Ike complained.

"Got reasons to dicker hard," Doc said, gathering up his loot.

By the time Doc and his companions came to the shade along Sugar Creek, it was noon. Also, Susie was wide awake again.

"Waaw!" she said, her face red and distorted, with anger.

MacLoyd, his face somewhat pale, leaned over the basket and said,

"Nice baby. Gets-ya-goo."

"Waaw!" Susie bellowed louder than ever.

"She's a-sayin'." Doc said wisely, "that she wants to chew on yore tin star while yuh're gettin' our dinner."

Doc was right. The tin star turned the trick, and MacLoyd, a pleased look on his bony face, allowed that Susie was right smart to make her wants known at such an early age.

DINNER over ,they drove on. A trail branched off to the right, and Doc, thinking of the old washing machine wringer, reined his fat bays along the narrow trail. Presently they came to Homer Prutt's place.

Homer, besides being a bachelor and a farmer of sorts, invented things, none of which ever worked. At the moment, he sat on his doorstep, his pointed chin cupped in his hands, his red-rimmed eyes staring off into space.

When Doc ambled up to him, the inventor let out a deep sigh and got slowly to his feet.

"Homer," Doc observed, "yuh look lower'n a snake in a rut."

Homer nodded his shaggy head. "Feel low," he returned. "I'm plumb out of inventin' ideas. Might as well be dead."

"Ever think of inventin' somethin' to help the women folks out?" Doc murmured. "Mebbe a contraption to roll out pie dough?"

Homer's eyes brightened. "Doc, yuh sometimes show a streak of genius. I never thought of that."

Doc had lifted the old wringer out of his covered wagon.

"Yuh'll need some rollers," he said cheerfully. "Nothin' better'n rubber rollers to flatten out pie dough."

"How much yuh want fer that?" Homer asked eagerly.

Doc's face fell. "Ain't fer sale. Wringers is hard to find—might do some swappin' though."

For the third time, Doc drove a hard bargain, refusing flatly to consider any of Homer's old inventions as swapping goods. When he finally left Homer Prutt's, he'd added to his loot four more hens, another pig, and a box of puzzles to boot. A trade wasn't a trade without boot.

Shortly before sundown, they arrived at

Themistocles Whetstone Zoop's homestead and found things in an uproar. It seemed that Rebecca Zenobia Zoop, six years old and very spoiled, was raising old Ned because she couldn't have her Pa's razor to play with. The box of puzzles made her forget all about the razor.

So Doc returned to the covered wagon without the puzzles, but he was leading a half-grown calf by a rope. Also, he had a red rooster, a clean white sheet and a lady's hat, very fancy, even if it was outdated by some ten years.

That night they made camp at Doc's favorite spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. While MacLoyd cooked supper, Doc proceeded to divide the sheet into several large but serviceable squares. As he worked, he took stock of the day's accumulations. For the sheriff's jug of applejack, he now had a chicken coop with eleven hens and a rooster in it, two pigs, a side of bacon, an old set of harness, a bushel of potatoes, a calf and a very fancy woman's hat. Also, he had a much torn-up sheet.

But as yet he hadn't swapped the cow to the sheriff for the cabin and the five acres of land at the edge of Dry Bluffs. He frowned at the white squares in his hands. If he didn't make that swap, he reckoned the whole town would have the laugh on him. But there was one ray of hope. Susie! With Susie on the sheriff's hands, anything might happen.

The middle of the next morning found them driving up in front of Dog-ears Dover's place. Dog-ears had moved in from Missouri, bringing along his assortment of twenty-one dogs and a hopeful trust in a future without work. His dogs set up a howl, and he came to the door of his cabin.

Doc, sliding down from the wagon, reckoned he'd never seen Dog-ears looking so sad.

"Right fine day," he observed cheerfully.

Dog-ears cussed heavily. "Would be, mebbe, if me an' the Widow Bates hadn't of had us a fallin' out last night."

Doc's face filled with deep sympathy.

"Women," he said, "can allus be made happy with presents. Somethin' purty like this."

He reached into the wagon and came up with the fancy hat, and Dog-ears' seamy face lost its scowl.

When Doc drove away, Dog-ears Dover was gazing fondly at the hat, which he held in his horny hands. Doc had added to his collection a fair horse, three cans of pork and beans, a pound of coffee and a mangy, long-eared pup to boot.

Sheriff MacLoyd glared at the old swapper.

"Doc," he said, "yuh oughta be hung! The Widow Bates'll take one look at that hat an' wham it in Dog-ears' face."

Doc was saved from making a reply by Susie, who at that moment let out a demanding squawk. The sheriff forgot his indignation in this new worry. They stopped in the shade, and Doc set the sheriff to milking the cow while he got out one of the squares he'd torn from the sheet. When MacLoyd had finished milking, Doc returned the red bandanna to him. The sheriff took it with some misgivings and doubt.

EARLY that afternoon, Doc drove his bays up to Ed Lunt's homestead. Here, by some fast and slick talking, he traded off the pup, which had taken the eye of Ed's youngest boy. For the pup, he got a cured ham, five jars of home-canned peaches and and assortment of garden seed to boot. Shortly after that, he drove his outfit up to the small, miserable cabin which Mary Gregg and her late husband had hoped to make into a home.

Mary Gregg was a small, thin girl, clean but poorly dressed. She brushed back her brown hair with a work-hardened hand and looked at Doc out of eyes that were red from crying.

Doc swept off his fancy Stetson and bowed deeply.

"Right handsome weather," he observed.

Mary said nothing.

"Heard in a roundabout way," he went on, "that yuh figured Susie'd be better off if yuh let the Craftons in Junction have her."

Mary began to cry in a hopeless, heartbreaking way.

"I didn't know what else to do with her," she sobbed. "I used to work for the Craftons, and I didn't know anyone around here to ask."

Doc wasn't the kind who could stand

to see anyone cry. He reached into the wagon and, with the sheriff watching him goggle-eyed, lifted out the basket and Susie.

Mary Gregg let out a little cry and ran forward. She caught up Susie, basket, tin star and all and held her tight.

"Susie," she said over and over, "I didn't want to give you away!" Then she looked up at Doc and began to cry again. "But I can't keep her. I don't have anything—"

"Why," Doc said blandly, "it seems all yore neighbors has sent some stuff that oughta help yuh out. Here's a hoss and some harness. A calf. Two pigs. Some cured meat. Chickens. Coffee, beans, peaches, garden seed an'—"

"But," Mary said, "I don't even have a home. I've got to give this place up and get out tomorrow."

Doc blinked rapidly. Here was an unexpected complication, but he was equal to the occasion. He glared up at Sheriff MacLoyd, who sat very stiff and straight on the spring seat, his bony face white and set, his pale eyes fixed on Susie, who was chewing contentedly on his tin star.

"Ever'body," Doc said so only the sheriff could hear, "has helped Mary an' Susie but you, yuh stingy ole hoss-thief! Now, if yuh had somethin' to give 'em—say a Jersey cow—so's Susie would allus be sure of good rich milk—"

The sheriff squirmed, for Susie, her blue eyes wide and round, was smiling up at him and gurgling in a friendly way.

"Mebbe," he whispered hoarsely, "yuh'd sell me that cow."

"I'd swap her for that cabin an' five acres," Doc said.

MacLoyd took another look at Susie. She was as cute as a kitten. Smart, too. She smiled at him and banged the old tin star on the basket. Nobody could resist that smile.

The sheriff nodded his bony head, climbed down from the wagon, untied the Jersey and led her over to Mary Gregg.

"Thank you," Mary said, but the deep worry was still on her young face.

"Everyone is awfully kind—but I can't keep these things. I don't have a home now, and—"

"I reckon I can fix that," Doc said

[*Turn page*]

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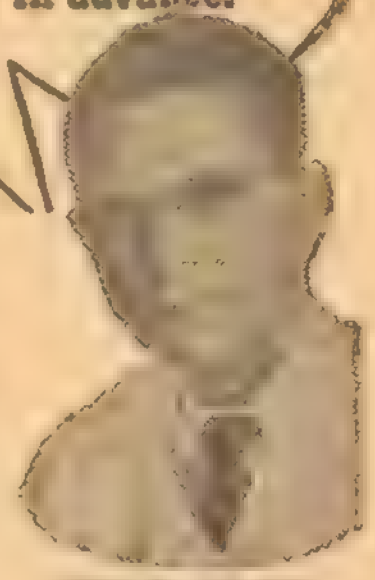

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quickly. "I own a little cabin an' some land right close to town. Just swapped fer it. Yuh can move in there an' stay as long as yuh like. With yore chickens an' pigs an' a little gardenin', along with some work yuh can pick up in town, you an' Susie will make out right well."

That evening, old Doc Swap, sitting in the front room of his neat little cottage, reckoned he was in a lot better fiddling trim than he'd been two nights ago. The more he played, the better the red-gold fiddle sounded. Maybe that was because he was remembering the grateful and happy look on Mary Gregg's face.

Also, he was remembering that he'd swapped Sheriff MacLoyd an old cow for a cabin and five acres of land.

"Pop! goes the weasel," the old fiddle sang.

Doc smiled contentedly, while his sock feet stamped out the time on the bare floor, and the furniture fairly danced all over the room.

Next Issue: DOC SWAP'S MEDICO MIXUP, by Ben Frank

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(Continued from page 8)

the traces and ran away on account of a passing automobile.

Accidents happened so often on this account that motorists were plenty unpopular and considered road pests. Folks said that horses never would stand for the power buggies and in some communities laws were passed against automobiles using certain roads.

But somehow, through one generation of colts into another was bred an animal understanding and acceptance of the horseless carriage. Now it's uncommon for any horse to take fright of an automobile. How did it all come about? Nobody knows. It's one of those mysteries of Nature beyond explanation.

The attitude of cows to autos is remarkable, too, when you come to think about it. Many a time I've passed half-wild range cattle that went on grazing, undisturbed, by the dust and speed and commotion of a car.

But let any driver stop and climb out of his car, then those cattle would go high-tailing.

It's the same way with wild game. Time and again I've got closer to deer while driving than it was possible to get on foot. Maybe you've passed a pond where wild ducks rested and fed, scared none whatever by passing traffic. But if one car pulled to a stop, they'd lift their heads, all wary and restless, and if a man showed himself they'd take off.

Elk Refuge

Up in the Northwest timber country is an elk refuge where a great herd of those lordly critters can be observed from the highway. They're not bothered a-tall by cars, busses or roaring big trucks. But if a man was to hunt them, he'd be lucky to get in gunshot, even downwind and wearing sneaker-bottomed shoes.

I had me an experience with some of those elk. In passing the refuge a while back, right recently it was, I saw a man at the yonder edge of a meadow, a man I had to confab with. So in I went and across, nearly got to where he was, mending a roof on an old cabin it looked like, when three young bull elk emerged from a thicket along a creek. There they stood, square where I had to pass.

[*Turn page*]

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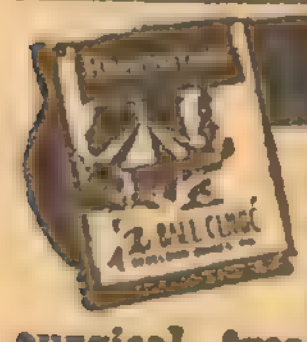

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Also, it dawned on me about then, I was wearing a red shirt. About the brightest red shirt ever made.

The three young bulls snorted and stood their ground. I was ashamed to turn back. I came within 15 feet of the foremost one, askeered to look him in the eye. F'act is, I was gazing around for the nearest climbing-size tree.

You bet I was plenty relieved when I got to the cabin and said to the man:

"These elk are pretty tame, ain't they?"

He spit over the eaves and squinted down at me with one eye.

"Tame?" he grunted. "Heck, mister, what d'you think I'm doin' up here on this roof? Matter o' fact, about five minutes ago I set a new world's record for running a hundred yards across that meadow in nuthin' flat!"

The Tamer They Are—

Folks that know tell me that there's no such thing as a tame wild animal, that the tamer they seem the more dangerous they might be.

That's true enough about bears, as you recollect me mentioning before, and I've known of several "tame" deer that turned on the persons that had made pets of them.

A buck deer can be wickeder than a wildcat, if it takes the notion. And speakin' of wildcats, there were three separate instances out in the desert Southwest this past season where wildcats roamed into town and raised rumpuses.

In one case a girl beside a swimming pool at the well-settled resort of Palm Springs was jumped by a wildcat, got scratched up before the varmint was chased away, later cornered and killed. Such things are hard to understand, because Western bobcats aren't noted for boldness in human presence. They're usually harmless, can be bluffed by a yapping poodle and have been known to shy away from a proud old barnyard rooster.

Here's Yore Answers

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simple, others hard for even an experienced cowpuncher to name. If you named 30 of the 72, it was a good average for anybody.

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A4 Cowhead	A5 Rocking H	A6 Flying O
A7 Z Bar	A8 Quarter Circle	A9 Lightning
B1 Spur	B2 Box L	B3 Hashknife
B4 Heart Bar	B5 A Triangle	B6 Bar X Bar
B7 O Bar O	B8 Rafter C	B9 Rocking Chair
C1 Snaketrack	C2 Keyhole	C3 76
C4 Cross L	C5 Acorn	C6 Beehive
C7 Hat	C8 Walking O	C9 Wineglass
D1 Flying Box	D2 Three Bar	D3 45
D4 E Arrow	D5 Quarter-moon	D6 M Bar
D7 Lazy V Bar	D8 Reverse B	D9 Diamond 2
E1 Frying Pan	E2 Bearpaw	E3 Bird
E4 Cross-Crescent	E5 Double O Bar	E6 Piece o' Pie
E7 S Bar H	E8 Bar H	E9 Seven Eleven
F1 Bell	F2 Ball	F3 Fish
F4 Shamrock	F5 Cane	F6 Fish Hook
F7 Horseshoe	F8 Starr	F9 JB
G1 IXL	G2 101	G3 Okey
G4 Hourglass	G5 Lazy E	G6 Double Diamond
G7 Rafter US	G8 BR	G9 Pinetree
H1 Bar H Bar	H2 Turkeytrack	H3 Dollar
H4 Bar Ten	H5 One Slash O	H6 Reverse E
H7 Sunup	H8 Two Spot Deuce	H9 Flying Triangle

Well, folks, I'll be on my way. We'll have another chat next month, and meanwhile you can listen to the editor's palaver.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

JIM HATFIELD, Texas Ranger and famous rider of Western danger trails, never let any situation beat him. But when the big law officer tackled the two-legged killer wolves that were out to murder a selected list of high-grade Texas folk in the Yellow Hills area, he had some of the closest squeaks of his thrill-filled career!

It's a big story—how he pulled their fangs and sent some of them to a hotter place than Texas ever thought of being. You'll find it in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, when you'll read—

GUNS OF THE YELLOW HILLS

by

JACKSON COLE

What possible interest could smooth-talking, smart-thinking, highly educated and supremely deadly Sidney Tynsdale have in wiping out so quiet, decent and honest a citi-

[*Turn page*]

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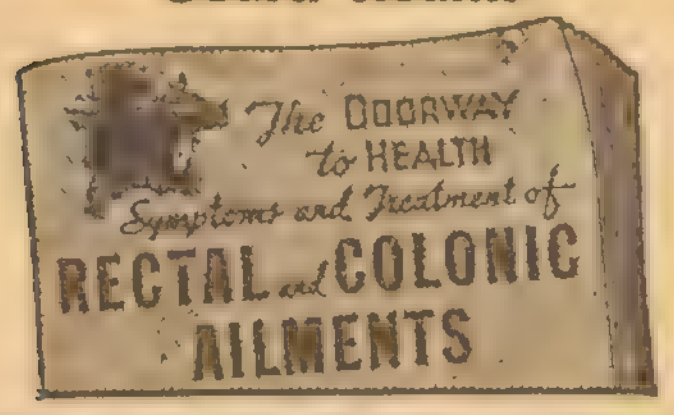

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zen of the community as old Lon Styles?

But Lon was first on the long death list, and the lonely old Confederate veteran was all by himself in his little cabin when Tynsdale's hired thugs, led by Dowie Burke, arrived. Defiant, brave, Styles faced them, but—

Burke's heavy right hand moved and Styles tried to save himself in a last desperate fling. He threw himself across the table and grasped his pistol. The rickety table tilted off the lamp and sent it crashing to the floor, but before the light was doused Burke had drawn and fired into Styles' side. The major caught two heavy bullets in the ribs, and was dying as the table turned over and threw him to the floor!

Styles had friends, and when they didn't see him around they went looking for him. The circling buzzards located old Lon—what was left of him—for them. But the discovery threatened to send Ben Naler, young cowman, Moss Jordan and Jordan's lovely daughter, Connie, to join Styles in death, for the thugs didn't like this interference. And fiery Moss Jordan was on their list, anyway.

Enter Jim Hatfield, sent from Austin by the chief of the Rangers at Jordan's request. Hatfield got his hands on Burke's list of those marked for death. Never mind how, but he did. And then there was the Old Nick to pay in the Yellow Hills.

The Ranger knew that Burke was no top man. Someone with real gray matter was behind Burke. That was Tynsdale. Hatfield traced him to Houston, where he discovered that Tynsdale was a big manufacturer of gunpowder and other explosives. His hired killers were surely burning plenty of his own product in the Yellow Hills, but that gave no clue to what Tynsdale was trying to do there.

Something else did, though. The manufacturer let the cat out of the bag, and Hatfield knew a cat when he saw one, particularly if

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it was a yellow cat. Hmmm. So that was it!

Then along comes Dowie Burke, blundering in, and Burke had been messing the Yellow Hills job badly—so Tynsdale had a plan for Burke that wasn't going to do the big thug's general health a bit of good. He had a plan for Jim Hatfield, too!

Well, there was no rule that said all the skulduggery and gunplay had to be in the Yellow Hills. The lid blew off in Houston with a loud bang, and the city smelled more gunsmoke than it had known in years.

Which wasn't strange. Somehow, wherever Jim Hatfield went on his Ranger jobs, gunsmoke got in his nostrils. He liked it, because it banished the skunk smell which had brought him there in the first place.

What with Tynsdale, and Burke, and Palacio, and about half a regiment of paid gunhands behind them, the skunk smell was sure powerful in the Yellow Hills. But the men of Yellow Hills got together, with Jim Hatfield leading them, and, brother, when the shootin' stopped, the air was right sweet again!

And then Hatfield showed the folks what Tynsdale had wanted, and everything became clear. But we're not going to take the suspense off the yarn for you by telling you the end. We'll just say that it is one of the best adventures Jim Hatfield ever had—which is sayin' plenty! And, when you've read the novel, GUNS OF THE YELLOW HILLS, go on to the other stories in the issue. They're all your kind of reading, pals!

OUR MAIL BAG

NOW the letters do pile in from you readers of TEXAS RANGERS! Good letters, too. We're mighty pleased, for one of the best ways to improve a magazine is to have the readers give their opinions and suggestions, and to learn from them. We like to hear from you, so don't spare the pen, pencil or typewriter when the mood strikes you to get in touch with us! Here are some typical current comments brought us by the postman:

I have read many western magazines, but my best reading of the west is found in the magazines published by your company.—*R. Thompson, Belfast, Northern Ireland.*

I have been reading your swell magazine for years. I think Jim Hatfield and the Doc Swap stories are the best put out. So don't change

[*Turn page*]

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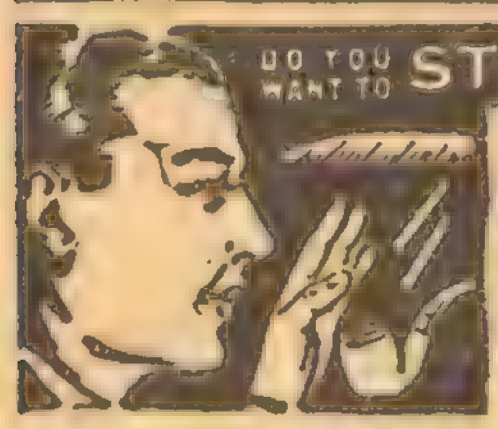

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them. Leave them like they are.—*J. D. Teague, Gastonia, N. C.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS over a year now, and I think it's a grand magazine. I think GULF GUNS was a great novel. Keep up the good work.—*Allen Haystead, Collingwood, Ont.*

LOOT OF THE WOLF in the June issue of TEXAS RANGERS was swell. So are the short stories. Please keep Jim Hatfield single.—*Everett L. Stedman, Terre Haute, Ind.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for quite a while now, and I think it a wonderful book. Jim Hatfield and his horse Goldy make the best story in the magazine. Please tell in one of the Hatfield stories soon how he came to own Goldy. I thank Jackson Cole for his wonderful yarns. I like plenty of shooting in the stories.—*(Miss) Sybila Roney, Olney, Ill.*

I am a constant reader of all western magazines, and have been reading your Jim Hatfield stories for near onto four years. Keep the man single. Women are all right in their place, but, in my estimation, there's no place for them in the Jim Hatfield stories. I had five and a half years of service along the Border, from Brownsville, Texas, to Rio Hondo City, and I knew the Southwest when a .45 was part of a dress uniform and a man looked out of place without sidearms. Keep the stories coming as you have. —*Leo F. Yochin, Erie, Pa.*

Jim Hatfield is a good character, but why not have him meet girls once in a while in his adventures. He need not get married, but I think it would be pretty good for him to be popular with the women. Have two or three principal ones that he runs into occasionally in his stories. In fact, you might have one of them get killed and then write a whole novel telling of how Jim gets revenge.—*Lynn Stanley Cheney, Yuma, Ariz.*

I read your books of Jim Hatfield every time I can get one. I am only a young lad, but that does not make any difference because I'm old enough to like a good yarn. My dad is one of your fans, too, and neither he nor I like the idea of Hatfield getting in love.—*Wayne Baker, Chillicothe, Mo.*

Well, fellers and gals, that's all for this time, except to thank you and to invite you again to join the letter-writing crowd and add your opinions and ideas about the magazine and its stories. You can reach us always by addressing—The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. A postcard is just as good as a sealed letter. *Hasta mañana,* chums.

—THE EDITOR.

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PLUMB BOGGED DOWN

(Concluded from page 96)

ing down to the courtroom in Basin City and tell what I'd seen through the old pair of field glasses that Herb traded me for a hard week's work last fall. As much as I hated to testify for a no-good citizen like Rusty Donahue, it wasn't him that started the fight over by Hat Crown Butte. It was Sam Clark, who had been nipping at a bottle of whisky.

"I saw Sam jump off his wagon, grab Rusty and pull him off his horse. Rusty was getting the worst of it when he bounced a rock off Sam's head. In desperation, I guess. And Sam went down. But before I could get across Dry Fork Canyon and over to him, a couple of fellows hauling corral poles had come along and taken him to town."

It was very quiet on the brink of Carcass Slough. Herb Lathrop blinked owlishly but said nothing.

"Sam Clark's all right now, Budge," McAllister finally remarked. "He told me in town last night that Rusty had been accusing him of stealing fence posts and wire from my range. But I happen to know the man who bought those posts and that wire—from Rusty. It was a letter from that uneasy man, in which he enclosed a check, that brought me to the ranch a little ahead of schedule this year."

Herb Lathrop still blinked and said nothing. McAllister grinned at the new manager of the AZ. Budge Bronson grinned back. Budge was remembering what Herb Lathrop had said earlier today, "Yuh won't lose anything by helping me." Yet brawny Budge hadn't the heart, right now, to remind a wrong guesser that he had been perfectly right once today.

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